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Marjorie Bruce's Lovers

BY MARY PATRICK.

INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I.

TORWOOD FARM.

"Well, my mind's made up, and, by the Lord! no man or woman born shall keep my lassie another year frae me."

So spoke old John Bruce, of Torwood Farm, as he sat at breakfast with his blooming, portly wife in their sunny parlor, one June morning; and as he spoke he brought his strong fist down on the well-spread table with an angry force which set the old-fashioned china cups and saucers jingling, and would have shaken the nerves of almost any other woman than just that calm, sensible, healthy one who sat opposite him, and who, fortunately for them both, had never been known to assert the possession of these troublesome organs.

When John Bruce's mind was made up, she knew, by the experience of nearly twenty years, that truly no man or woman born need expect to turn by opposition the current of his will; so, though what he said disappointed her, she merely remarked, in her pleasant somewhat deep-toned voice, "Well, well, father, you've settled it; so we'll say no more about it," and proceeded with steady hand to lift the cream-jug and pour a liberal supply of its contents into his third cup of tea; then, handing him the cup, she, with a perfectly unperturbed air, went on with her own hearty breakfast.

Spite of his sixty years, John Bruce was a ruddy, hale man. His small blue eyes had not lost a whit of their humorous intelligence; his rather short, stoutly built figure none of its athletic strength; his blood ran as quickly through his veins now as when, a jovial bachelor of forty, he had, to the consternation of his jovial bachelor friends, brought home a young wife to Torwood Farm, where, for near a score of years previously, he had lived in a rough plenty such as most farmers love; riding as good a horse as any man in the shire, laird or tenant; following the hounds when the meet lay within convenient distance; passing jolly evenings over often-replenished tumbblers of whisky-toddy, occasionally enjoyed in the company of a country gentleman of congenial tastes, usually in that of some farmer-friend.

The only son of an extravagant laird, whose heavily mortgaged estate had at his death been put into the market, realizing little more than sufficient to stock a large sheep-farm, John Bruce was admitted by most of his neighbors to have peculiar claims to gentlemanhood, and a certain prestige distinguished his position from that of the neighboring farmers.

Well born, fairly educated, a first-rate shot, a capital teller of humorous stories, and withal a Tory to the backbone, he, in his bachelor days especially, was sure of a hearty welcome at many a county mansion of his district.

A merry, social, hot-blooded fellow, he seldom declined an opportunity of enjoyment, and consequently was looked upon by dour plodding folk as sure to come to ruin.

Yet somehow all went well with him. His flocks were usually the most prolific, his crops the heaviest in the parish; laborers toiled for him as they would do for no other master, far or near. No more regular visitor had the factor of the Earl of Castleton's estates each rent-day.

When, too, after long procrastination, it pleased this life-enjoying gentleman to try the matrimonial lottery, his customary good-luck attended him. A very "crown unto her husband" was the wife he brought home.

Strange to say, this couple, now cherishing a steady, tender affection for each other, did not begin with any strong attachment.

John Bruce, weary of bachelor joys, needed a wife, and thought well of this comely, sensible, modest-eyed young lady, of whom everybody thought well; and she (her father, the parish minister, newly laid in his grave) sorely needed a home and a protector, and thought Torwood Farm a bonny place, and its master a manly, kind-hearted, cheery gentleman; and so they cast in their lot together, nor had ever afterward cause to regret doing so.

No sooner was she settled down in her new home than she set herself to the task of bringing into order the rather chaotic elements she found there.

A good woman, strong and wise, reared in a pure moral atmosphere, and unable to breathe any other, there was no end to the good which the still, steady influence of her fair life effected on such as came into daily contact with it.

Little by little she weaned her husband from his unwise indulgences. She taught their servants habits of regularity, and made the farm-house really a home.

It may be, after all, that her husband's reformation was helped on by the girl-baby who came ere a year was out. Possibly he might have wearied of well-doing and fallen back into his old, jolly, careless ways, had not the new, strange joy of fatherhood filled his heart.

He learned for the first time what pure yet passionate love is when the baby-fingers closed around his. Long ere the child could speak, he had yielded himself up a willing slave to her baby caprices. Her first inarticulate utterances were the sweetest of music to his ear. As she grew up, a bonny, bright, wayward creature, the life and sunshine of her home, each succeeding year added a fresh link to the chain which bound him in pleasant slavery.

Meanwhile his wife, unwearingly devoting herself to the performance of her many duties, perceived with a natural disappointment that these two were infinitely more to each other than she was to either of them. She did not complain, and nobody suspected her of this feeling.

The girl loved her mother dearly, and respected her more than any other human being; only, as was to be expected, her father's boundless indulgence and the assurance of her own power over him made her regard him with a peculiar fondness.

And now having given you an unceremonious introduction to the Bruce family, I shall return to the point from which this simple story of mine started, merely premising that a proposal to send their daughter back for another year to the fashionable Parisian school where she was at present had called forth that heavy thump of the paternal fist and the energetic declaration with which this chapter opens.

The morning was sunny, and the hay just then needed sunshine; the window, thrown half-open, admitted a pleasant breeze and a cheerful combination of farm-yard noises—a cackling of hens, and quacking of ducks, and neighing of horses, and lowing of cattle; a cheery sound too of human footsteps and voices, for the parlor overlooked the chief farm-yard, which in the morning was ever a lively scene.



"BELIEVE ME, MARJORIE," WHISPERED HE TENDERLY, "I LOVE YOU WITH MY WHOLE SOUL."

From his seat at the breakfast-table John Bruce could see his men leading the horses to and from the great moss-grown trough, his maids driving the sleek, skinned cows from the byres to their pasture; and the old farmer liked well such an outlook as this.

Glancing at his wife's face, and seeing it perfectly good-natured, his own grew the same, and he presently vouchsafed a remark, in quite a mild tone,

"I'm growing an old man, Mary," he said, "and it's but natural I should like to keep my lassie near me."

His wife's kind heart was touched. "Yes, father, it's but natural," she echoed, looking up at him, with the kindly half-smile which was seldom absent from her face; "only," she added, after a momentary silence, with a look of care accompanying her words, "Marjorie's but a fanciful young thing yet, and I'd fain have had her out of the way while Lord Castleton's at Torwood. He's a fine-looking young fellow, and I don't like our Marjorie being constantly thrown in the way of meeting him."

Mr. Bruce fidgeted in his chair, and threw an impatient glance at her.

"Tuts, woman!" he said, crossly. "Lord Castleton's to marry his cousin, as you very well know. What harm will it do Madge to meet him now and then? I'll warrant she'd have a good laugh at us if she heard our conversation. Why, she speaks about him in her last letter in a joking way that shows plain enough her heart's whole." A surprised, grieved look from his wife stopped him.

"I never saw that letter, nor knew it had come to the house, father," she said, gravely; and as she spoke she sighed.

The old man laughed in a confused way. "I've let the cat out of the bag, wife," he said. Then, drawing a letter out of his pocket, he handed it to her, and watched her as she read it.

"It isn't Marjorie's fault, anyway. She never bade me keep it from you; only, as it was but a silly bit scrawl, full of nonsense, I just meant to do so," he said, in a few moments, perceiving that her face grew very grave as she perused the crumpled, closely written sheet.

To him this letter contained nothing but new proofs of the lassie's spirit; to her it seemed full of dangerous self-will and unbecoming levity. It was dated from Paris, and ran as follows:

"DEAREST DADDY,—Madame is going to write to mamma and you, advising you to send me back to this wearisome, wearisome educational tread-mill for another year; and so I send you this on the sly, to tell you I won't ever be friends with you if you even give a single moment's consideration to her proposal.

"I wouldn't stay a week, supposing you did send me back, so don't you try it. I am nearly eighteen now, and I know as much as I want to, and mean to have a real jolly time until I get married and settled down, as I suppose I must some day. I don't want to get married for years and years, and all that time I mean to stick close to you, dear old dad, and tease and coax and love you awfully. I'll do everything I like, and you'll do everything I bid you; and we'll have such happy time—won't we?

"I hope you are behaving yourself, and not flying up into rages every now and then, as you used to do. You know in this hot weather rages are dangerous indulgences for stout old gentlemen like you. Mind that you are being very good to mamma, and that you are giving her her own way now and then, just for a great treat, for she is worth a score of easy, selfish folk like you and me; and by-and-by, when I have sown all my wild oats, I mean to be very good and wise, like her; and then, dear old dad, surely our combined exertions will keep you in the way you should go. However, don't be downcast, dear old man; I promise you that I shall be my own silly happy self for years and years first.

"By-the-by, I am wearying terribly to see Lord Castleton. Lady Dorothea gave me a *carte* he had sent her, and I gaze at it in unutterable admiration by the hour together. He has grown handsomer than ever in his two years of travel, and I know not how I can possibly escape falling a victim to his fascinations, even although I am well aware that he is to marry his cousin, Mrs. Lisle, and so keep her money-bags in the family. You will be glad to hear that Lady Castleton is once more allowing me to form one in Lady Dorothea's suite on your journey home, so you need have no anxiety about me.

"Good-bye, darling daddy. I weary so to see your dear red face and mamma's bonny one, and to trot about the old farm, as I used to do. Write at once to madame, and tell her I'd like to stay with her, only you too need me at home. I didn't tell her I wanted to leave, of course—I always shirk disagreeables when I can, you know, and I can't deny that I'm a bit of a deceiver. Yet you must believe me, for ever and ever, dear dad, your loving lassie

MARJORIE.

"P. S.—Don't bother over what I've said about Lord Castleton. I was only joking. I am a damsel of low degree, and he is, woe is me! a being of a totally different order. I shall take good care of my susceptible heart."

Mrs. Bruce made not a single remark during the reading of this long letter, and when she had finished she folded it up and gave it into her husband's hand without a word, a grave shake of her head indicating her disapproval of its contents.

The old man hastened to take up the cudgels in the cause of the absentee.

"Well, woman, what ails you? What's wrong with the lassie's letter?" he asked, touchily, quite forgetting his own previous doubts and misgivings.

Mrs. Bruce, thus questioned, did not shrink from speaking her mind. In matters of conscience she never feared to speak out.

"It isn't a pretty letter, father," she said, gravely,

and went on, quite disregarding his rising choler; "it isn't a letter I would have written to my father when I was her age, and I'm thinking the Fifth Commandment's as binding now as it was then. Besides, I'm vexed that she should seek to deceive the lady we gave her in charge to, and she so kind and attentive, too."

Mr. Bruce interrupted impatiently: "Tuts, tuts, woman! you're like a' the unco' guid—desperate hard on young things. What's the harm o' sending a bit letter on the sly?"

"It's deceitful, father, and I'm heart-grieved our girl should stoop to deceit," his wife returned, very gravely.

The old man fidgeted in his chair and muttered a contemptuous exclamation, affecting to laugh as he did so.

Quite unperturbed, Mrs. Bruce went on: "You may laugh at me if you like, father, but all your laughing will never change wrong to right—the straight road's shortest, as I'd like Marjorie to recollect. No good comes of crooked ways, and it little becomes us to encourage her in trying them. No, no, it isn't a pretty letter, and I'd never have written like to my father though I had been but eight instead of eighteen."

She spoke with a certain air of patient, gentle dignity, and her words and look made an impression on her husband.

A rover in forbidden paths, as he himself had been, he would fain, after all, that the lassie should tread the safe old ways her mother and her mother's kin had trodden before her, and a reflection of his wife's gravity showed itself on his face, though he answered with a joke.

"Well, well, wife, you'll mind your father was in the ministerial line, and black coats are ever a deal respected. Maybe if Maja had had a douce minister for her father she'd have honored him to your heart's content."

Mrs. Bruce smiled, and he went on with increasing good-humor:

"Ay, I dare say she'd have written mighty respectful letters to him, and have kept her confidences for her sweethearts, most likely. Be glad the lassie's as good a lassie as she is, Mary, and make allowance for her failings. She canna help taking after her hot-headed auld sinner of a father, can she? 'Deed, to speak the plain truth you're so fond of, you're to blame for not having chosen a husband of quite a different stamp. If you had seen to her having a father of the grim orthodox sort, I'll warrant she'd have turned out quite a paragon of perfection."

There were both justice and good-humor in this speech, Mrs. Bruce inwardly admitted, and she smiled as she shook her head in slightly rebuking fashion. Modestly desiring to change the subject, as she saw from the twinkle of her husband's eyes that he was about to pursue his joke, she hastened to give him an agreeable bit of news which she had, until now, forgotten to communicate.

"There's another o' the brown quays calved, father," she said. "I wish ye'd step in to take a look at them and see if the calf's worth rearing. I can take it and another in hand yet, and leave plenty cream for Marjorie besides."

The farmer looked well pleased, and rose with alacrity.

"It's no fair to throw so many hungry young things on you either, Mary. I doubt your milk money will be but little this year," he said, casting a wavering, half-abashed glance at her as he lifted his big oaken stick and broad-brimmed white hat from a table by the window. "And yet your offer's tempting, for I made well on my reared beasts last season," he added with a sigh.

Mrs. Bruce, rising from the breakfast-table, came up to him and arranged his necktie, saying, with a smile:

"Well, well, father, when my pocket-money runs short I'll beg from you, and you'll never have the face to say me nay."

Her husband's face beamed assurance of his satisfaction.

"You're a wise woman and a wholesome-natured, Mary, my dear," he said, taking her hand and patting it affectionately. "Deed, I might ha' gone farther and fared worse than I did when I went to the manse for a wife. If Madge grows just such a woman as her mother, I'll be well content."

Then, with a parting nod of farewell, he left the room and set out on his second morning round—a colly, which had been sleeping at his feet, starting up and following him.

"A wise woman and a wholesome-natured" indeed she was.

No one who had watched her through the long, quiet hours of that day—watched her with her husband, with her servants, with her beasts—writing wise, kind counsels to the troublesome little beauty her daughter; carrying nourishing dainties prepared by her own hands to the sick bairn at the lone cot-house on the hill-side, where the shepherd's widow carried on a brave battle with poverty, and, thanks to Mrs. Bruce, seemed like to conquer in the end—could have denied the truth of that saying.

Had my heroine, bonny, willful, unwise Marjorie, been formed in a like mould, her love story would have been a very pleasant one to tell. Such as she is we must bear with her, and be thankful that, if far from a model woman, she is at least fair to look upon, merry as a kitten, pure as a June lily in the farm-house garden, warm-hearted as ever yet was daughter of Eve. How the pretty damsel is found in such aristocratic company my next chapter must tell.

CHAPTER II.

TORWOOD HOUSE.

FIRST of all, I shall go back to the days of the late Lord Castleton, the present lord's father. In early youth he was a sad prodigal, and contrived to get

through an almost incredible number of thousands in the space of a very few years; but, thanks to his estates being entailed, he found the road to ruin less easy than some similarly disposed young gentlemen do. At the age of five-and-twenty, finding himself sorely straitened in circumstances, he set about repairing his fortunes, married a beautiful young heiress of a particular descent, paid his debts out of the fortune she brought him, and, retiring with her to the country, completely changed his course of life.

Torwood House, a fine old mansion in one of the southern counties of Scotland, became the chief home of the aforesaid young couple; and there, in course of time, were born to them a son and daughter, Herbert and Dorothea.

Long ere the birth of their second child, Lord Castleton and his lady had found out their incompatibility of tastes and disposition, and every year of their married life made them more indifferent to each other. He had married her because she was rich and in other respects a desirable bride; but had she afterward sought to win his love by patient, gentle, unwearying study of his inclinations, she might have succeeded. She, however, a romantic enthusiastic girl of eighteen, had married him because under his prepossessing exterior she believed every conceivable noble quality existed, and when by slow degrees she learned to know him as he really was—a very selfish, very prosaic mortal whose good looks and high animal spirits were his chief recommendation—in sore disappointment, she turned away from him and sought elsewhere for the sympathy of thought and feeling which her nature craved.

She had no lack of intellectual gifts, and in their cultivation she found solace and distraction. Footsore and weary, treading the dusty highway of real life, she wandered into the pleasant dewy pastures of the ideal, and there selfishly continued to wander, utterly regardless of the claims which her husband and children had upon her.

By-and-by she gained an honorable place in the world of letters—the critics acknowledged her as a powerful novelist, a poet of great promise. Her husband shrugged his broad shoulders, and refused to congratulate her; nay, professed a still increasing indifference to everything but his children, his dogs and horses, and rural amusements; and so the breach between the married pair went on widening. And yet there was little outward sign of disunion in this household. Lady Castleton, dwelling apart in dignified seclusion, exercised no restraint over the family life, which, thanks to Lord Castleton's fondness for his children, was a tolerably happy one.

Years after he was laid in his grave, these children—children no longer—cherished his memory with wonderful tenderness, and spoke regretfully of the merry times his indulgence had insured them in their early youth; and though folks said he spoiled them, I am inclined to believe they were wrong. Honest love, be it ever so blundering, is a mighty agent in the development of our best qualities.

One of the few likings Lord and Lady Castleton shared was a liking for their humble neighbors, the Bruces of Torwood Farm.

Ever since Marjorie Bruce could remember, she had been in the habit of paying frequent visits to Torwood House. She had misty memories of being carried there on her father's strong shoulder in days when her baby feet were not long in tiring; her first rides on the diminutive Shetland pony her father gave her on her sixth birthday were along the quiet country roads which, passing by the farm-house, led next to one of the entrances to the mansion—a high, old-fashioned gateway, flanked on either side by a clumsy pillar, on which a grim stone lion crouched frowning on all who passed by that way. Sometimes John Bruce would accompany the little rider up to the great house; sometimes he would but open the gate for her, and watch her lovingly as she rode away up the avenue.

For the little girl there was ever a welcome of the most cordial kind from pretty little Lady Dorothea, whose favorite playfellow she had become. Children of her youthful ladyship's rank were scarce in that neighborhood, and her parents permitted her to make a friend of this well-bred, engaging little damsel, without troubling themselves about possible future embarrassments arising from the long-continued intimacy of a couple of girls so different in social standing.

Neither did any misgivings arise in the minds of Marjorie's parents until it was too late to make matters right. Gratification at the honor done their darling was for a long time their chief feeling on the subject of this friendship, and the attentions which Lord Castleton was pleased to pay themselves naturally served to make them more anxious to show a due sense of his kindness.

So when, after the earl's little son was sent off to a public-school, leaving his sister to lonely studies under the tuition of an accomplished governess, her parents begged that her playmate Marjorie might pass the mornings with her and share her lessons, the offer was closed with at once.

As the governess declared that Lady Dorothea made much more satisfactory progress in her education, now that she had Marjorie's companionship, this arrangement continued to exist unaltered year after year. Once Lady Castleton deigned to put the little students through a hasty examination, and on this occasion her verdict was that "they were a pair of stupid, idle little chits, and that their governess deserved great credit for her patience in bearing with them."

Having once formed this opinion, she showed no further interest in their lessons, and, to their great satisfaction, they were left entirely to the care of their governess, who, being an earnest and capable teacher, by dint of much labor succeeded, by-and-by, in bringing them up to the average young-lady mark in intellectual attainments, besides permitting in each of them the cultivation of one unmistakable taste.

Little Lady Dorothea, ere she had quitted infancy, drew with wonderful precision such objects as it pleased her to attempt representing. Marjorie Bruce loved music, and showed neither idleness nor stupidity when her tiny fingers found their way to the keys of the piano, which to her fellow-student was an instrument of torture; and, good masters being found for them when their governess pronounced them ready to profit by their instructions, each of the girls had at an early age made uncommon progress in her chosen study.

Lord Castleton's demonstrative fondness for his children lasted steadily all those years of their early youth; and when, after a short illness, he died, about two years and a half before my story opens, he left a sad blank in the household.

Many changes followed. Lady Castleton departed on a solitary tour over the Continent; the new lord, his college studies not uncreditably concluded, set off for the East in the company of an adventurously minded couple of college chums; and Lady Dorothea was consigned to a Parisian school, where special arrangements were made for the continuance of her art-education.

Marjorie Bruce, forsaken for a time by her aristocratic friends, ran wild about the farm, and enjoyed herself immensely, riding, driving, playing at dairy-maid's work, and alternately provoking and charming everybody around her.

At the end of three months, however, Lady Dorothea, grieving still on account of her father's loss, and missing terribly, in her new quarters, the freedom of her old home, pleaded so pitifully for the companionship of her friend Marjorie that her mother exerted herself to secure it for her, and succeeded in overcoming the Bruce's scruples about the wisdom of giving further educational advantages to a girl in her rank.

Marjorie herself wished to go, and so of course in the end she went, and was received with open arms by her young ladyship. Much to the wonder of their fellow-pupils, the sisterly intimacy of the old days was steadily maintained during their stay at school. There, too, Marjorie found favor in the eyes of nearly all her associates, spite of their aristocratic prejudices.

The girl spoke with perfect frankness of all the details of her home life, and was proudly careful to disclaim all pretensions to social equality, yet carried her pretty head with such a natural grace, and was so lively and fearless and unmistakably well-bred, that she found a vantage-ground of her own.

And now, their school life over, the girls were coming home for good—Lady Dorothea happy in the prospect of "coming out" next season, Marjorie vaguely anticipating all manner of pleasant things. Lady Castleton's household was to resettle at Torwood House, where the young lord was shortly expected; so the girl felt secure of abundant present amusement and distraction.

Without further preface, I shall now go on to tell you her love-story.

STORY.

CHAPTER I.

MARJORIE.

It was a sultry June afternoon, and every door and window in the farm-house stood open.

"Beau-ty, Beau-ty, Beau-ty!" sung out old John Bruce's strong voice, as he went up and down the passages calling his daughter, and there were infinite pride and tenderness in his very way of uttering her foolish pet name.

A gentleman lounging on the parlor sofa, a cigar in his mouth, marked this, and, curious to see into what sort of fair woman the pretty slip of a girl he remembered had now developed, listened with interest for an answer to this call.

It came presently. From somewhere in the lower regions a fresh, girlish voice cried, "Coming, old dad, coming!" in a tone scarcely less fond; and then Mr. Bruce re-entered, and, sitting down in his usual seat, an old-fashioned easy-chair by the hearth, bade his visitor go on smoking, and proceeded to fill himself a fresh pipe, the parlor being also the smoking-room, by Miss Marjorie's special desire. "She preferred being choked to being deserted by the men-folk," she had emphatically declared.

"You are very fond of each other, you two, Mr. Bruce," the stranger remarked, smiling in an amused way.

The old man responded warmly. "She is all the world to me, my lord." Whereupon, touched by the pathos of his tone, Lord Castleton—for he it was—grew grave and kept a respectful silence.

A tall, fair-complexioned, handsome young fellow, broad-shouldered and of well-built figure, looking good-humoredly upon the world out of a pair of lazy, kindly blue eyes, and on small provocation displaying in hearty laughter a set of faultless teeth—boasting, too, a profusion of sunny-tinted fair beard and mustache—one could understand Mrs. Bruce's alarms for her daughter of eighteen.

"Yes, just all the world to me, sir," Mr. Bruce presently repeated, in an absent way; and, as he spoke, he looked towards the open door where he expected her to appear. "Hush! here she comes—not a word! I want to take the lassie by surprise," he added.

A quick patter of brisk little feet sounded in the lobby leading from the kitchen regions to the hall, as she ran along, talking half to herself and half to her father, whom she supposed alone in the parlor.

"Poor old dad! had he nobody to fill his pipe and bring him his slippers, and make much of him, this tiring warm day?"

I do not know how much more kind nonsense she might have uttered had not the sight of the visitor checked her tongue as she entered the parlor. For an instant she stood transfixed; then, as the two gentle-

men, diverted by her non-plussed expression, laughed in concert, she rallied and came forward, pouting and shaking her head in comical rebuke.

Looking at her critically, Lord Castleton decided that the pet name her father had given was hers by other claim than that of long possession.

Gracefully formed, slender, yet healthily moulded, her figure alone would have charmed an artist. Color that came and went, now flushing her prettily rounded cheeks into exquisite bloom, now leaving them faintly pink as a sea-shell, gave a chargeful charm to her delicately-featured girlish face, lighted up by large dark eyes, and crowned by a great soft coil of silky dark-brown hair.

Just then, startled into becoming blushes and smiles, yet carrying her prettily shaped head with the grace of a princess, she looked her very loveliest.

"I am awfully angry with you, papa," she said, parenthetically; then she turned to Lord Castleton, who had risen to greet her, and with a respectful yet dignified little bow, begged him to excuse her rude entry.

"There's a real young lady welcome for your lordship. Why she's quite a credit to the Paris school, after all," Mr. Bruce said, gayly; then, undismayed by the indignant frown with which the damsel turned to him, he went up to her and slipped his arm round her slim waist. Lord Castleton looking from the one to the other with a sparkle of fun in his eyes, while affecting to be depressed by the ceremonious nature of her greeting, remonstrated against the injustice of his being punished for Mr. Bruce's offenses.

"Here have I come home from long wanderings up and down the earth, and you won't so much as shake hands with me, Miss Marjorie," he said, with a hurt air, sighing and looking hard at her.

The girl laughed, and slipping from her father's embrace, held out both her little hands, saying, with a blush and an arch upward glance, "You are very kind to come and see us so soon. Of course you can shake hands with me as long as you like, Lord Castleton."

The young man was not slow in profiting by this permission; and, while her hand lay in his, Marjorie explained, looking down at her dress: "I was in the milk house learning to make up butter when papa called, and I just came running up as I was."

Her pink cotton morning dress was tucked up, giving a glimpse of the prettiest of ankles and tiniest of feet encased in smart high heeled shoes with silver buckles; her plump, rounded arms were bared to the elbow; but neither of the gentleman would admit that her appearance needed apology.

Smiling and blushing at their compliments, she proceeded to fill her father's still neglected pipe, while he re-seated himself in his chair and looked at her with fond pride. His was not the only pair of eyes that watched her admiringly, and the consciousness of this put her in a pretty becoming flutter.

"There, papa, dear, now I'll give you your slippers. I spoil him awfully, Lord Castleton," she added presently, giving him his pipe; then, kneeling, she drew on his feet a pair of prettily embroidered slippers—the work of her own little hands of course.

I fear the coquettish damsel knew how becoming her lowly posture and loving occupation were, for she lingered unnecessarily upon her knees, flashing bright, roguish glances up into the old man's face.

Lord Castleton who was accustomed to note the ruses of pretty womankind, inwardly smiled at the unsuspecting good faith with which the recipient of these pleasant attentions accepted them.

"She is very fond of her old dad, you see, Lord Castleton," he said, half apologetically, as he stroked the girl's soft, dark hair; and then, stooping down, he whispered a tender "God bless you, my little lass!" which had the effect, for the time being, of banishing all vain, coquettish feelings from her mind.

She rose to her feet, looking suddenly serious. For the hundredth time she resolved to recompense his love by becoming very staid, and sensible, and mindful of her duties, and, as a first step in the right direction, she began to offer hospitable attentions to their guest.

"She was so sorry her mother was not at home; she had gone into the town to do their weekly marketing, and left her housekeeper in her absence. It was so kind of his lordship to pay them a visit already. The afternoon was very hot, and perhaps his lordship would take a glass of beer; or would he rather have something else? She hoped he would always just ask for what he wanted when he did them the honor of coming to their house." No demure young dame of the olden times could have appeared more thoroughly engrossed by hospitable cares; and her father, who had not yet ceased to consider her as a mere child, to be petted and played with, watched her in admiring wonder.

His lordship was not slow to accept the kind service she showed herself so anxious to render; he drank the beer she presently brought him, allowed her to bring a fresh cigar, and establish him in a more comfortable position on the sofa.

"If she was determined to spoil him, too, he would make no objections, but be very grateful indeed," he told her, with one of his brightest and most winning smiles; whereat she laughed, and forgot her pretty humility.

"I doubt you are a very lazy fellow," she retorted, shaking her head, and flashing one of her slightly impudent, wholly charming, glances into his handsome face, just then expressive of indolent content.

He nodded assent; and the farmer, serenely puffing away at his pipe, ceased smoking, and laughed aloud.

"Come, Beauty, you must mind your manners, you know," he said, shaking his head rebukingly.

Marjorie looked archly from under her lifted eyebrows at Lord Castleton.

"It is such hard work, please your lordship," she said, plaintively; and, as she spoke, she made a little courtesy of mock humility.

"And this isn't weather for hard work, is it, Miss Marjorie?" the young nobleman returned, in a lazily sympathizing tone, keeping his eyes on her face as she stood before him, her hands demurely folded and her eyes cast down.

"And you won't be angry though I don't mind my manners?" she went on, with another bright glance at him.

"And I won't be angry though you don't mind your manners," he repeated, playfully mimicking her tone.

"And I won't be angry though you don't mind yours, then," laughed the girl, in her frankest, merriest tones.

Lord Castleton nodded and smiled lazy thanks, but Mr. Bruce's face betrayed some uneasiness. For the first time since they had been uttered he thought of his wife's words—"Marjorie's but a fanciful young thing, and I'd have liked to keep her out of the way while Lord Castleton's at Torwood"—and was troubled. "We're all right now. Go and finish making up your butter, my girl," he said, in suspicious haste, looking hard at her as, thus addressed, she turned round to him.

There was eager entreaty in his eyes, and Marjorie read his thoughts in one moment, and was mightily diverted.

"No, thank you, dad," she said, with a saucy toss of the head; "I've left the dairy-maid to finish that job, and I sha'n't undertake it in a hurry, I can tell you. Don't think I've come home to be useful, for I haven't."

"You've come home to be ornamental, at all events, Miss Marjorie," said the gentleman on the sofa, taking the cigar from his lips and glancing admiringly at her.

Unheeding her father's disturbed look, she persisted in her resolve to be as charming as possible. The delightful excitement of flirting with a live young lord was not to be had every day.

"Allow me to return the compliment, Lord Castleton," she said, returning his glance with a merry, coquettish one; whereupon the gentleman rose to his feet and bowed profoundly, making a pretty little speech of thanks.

Mr. Bruce's brow clouded ominously, and he fidgeted in his chair, as if his annoyance needed some vent.

The girl saw that it was quite time for her to exercise her soothing powers. Slipping up behind his chair and putting her pretty arms round his neck, she pressed her blooming cheek against his.

"I don't believe you love me half as much as I do you, you cross, unkind old dad!" she whispered, as, mollified by her caress, he smiled tenderly upon her.

He had not meant his crossness to be perceived, and he looked perturbed.

What foolish notions might he not unwittingly be suggesting to his inexperienced, innocent little lass, who, if left to herself, would be unlikely to trouble her head with thoughts of love!

"Shall I give you some music, dad?" she said, aloud, a moment after.

Mr. Bruce looked hesitatingly at Lord Castleton, who, while this pretty little interlude was going on, was smoking away in discreet abstraction. That young gentleman appeared settled for the afternoon, judging by the lazy composure of his attitude; so the old man agreed to Marjorie's proposal, thinking any occupation safer than idleness for the lively damsel.

Lord Castleton professed himself delighted to listen, and was about to quit his position on the sofa in order to establish himself by the piano, when Marjorie stopped him.

"Please lie still and smoke, or I sha'n't play, Lord Castleton. It puts me out to have anybody at my elbow when I'm playing," she said, and so he kept his place.

And Marjorie seated herself at the piano, and, as was her wont, went into dream-land. Soft, sweet melody filled the simple little room where the afternoon sunshine streamed in through the two little windows looking on the farm-yard.

The two men smoked and enjoyed it, and the pleasant sight of that graceful, girlish figure, away in gently to and fro, as the little white hands wandered over the keys; and by-and-by Mr. Bruce fell sound asleep in his chair, letting his pipe fall on to the floor.

The noise startled Marjorie from the reverie into which she had sunk. She turned round from the piano, and, perceiving what had happened, rose from the music-stool and smilingly went up to Lord Castleton, who, having made room for her on the sofa, was beckoning her to seat herself beside him.

She did so, blushing prettily, yet trying to appear quite unembarrassed.

"You must excuse papa, Lord Castleton. Music very often sends him to sleep," she said, in lowered tones.

The young gentleman affected to be hurt by this little apology, and shook his head in comical rebuke.

"Come, now, Miss Marjorie," he said, putting away his cigar and edging a little nearer her, "this isn't fair; you're breaking our agreement already."

She laughed a confused little laugh. "Oh, I quite forgot! I beg your pardon," she answered, glancing shyly towards her father, and adding a soft "Hush!" which had the effect of making Lord Castleton almost whisper his next remark (he had no objections to the old gentleman's taking a long nap), uttered with his most engaging air.

"I fear you have a dreadfully short memory. Why, you received me to-day as if I were quite a stranger; and even now you are as distant as if the dear old days when you and Dorothea and I were such friends had utterly escaped your recollection. Truly time brings changes."

He sighed deeply, and looked into her face with a plaintive expression.

Marjorie laughed again, but made no other reply. A strange, new feeling of bashful awkwardness, for which she heartily despised herself, was taking possession of her.

Lord Castleton's lazy, blue eyes were not slow in reading faces, and in Marjorie's look he found flattering

assurance of his own power over her. He magnanimously resolved to be more careful in avoiding all appearance of love-making, lest this seemingly susceptible little heart should suffer, and at once endeavored to set matters on a safe footing.

"Now, listen to me for one minute, you naughty girl," he said, assuming a paternal air, which presently made Marjorie look at him in a surprised, diverted way. "You have been a dear, kind little sister to Dolly so long that all our family claim you as one of ourselves, and naturally expect you to throw off with us the troublesome restraints etiquette imposes. You and Dolly and I are sure to be a great deal together this autumn; and you will be very uncomfortable, and make us all very uncomfortable, unless you make up your mind to treat me quite as a brother—a big brother—very lazy and good-for-nothing, but determined to make you both as happy as he possibly can, and to take great care of you, should you ever need his protection."

A low, saucy little laugh made the earl stop abruptly in his harangue, and feel that he had made himself an object of aversion to his auditor.

"I am ever so much obliged to you, Lord Castleton; but really I am very well able to take care of myself; and, besides, I have papa to look after me; so I don't think you will be called upon to make any extraordinary efforts in my behalf," she said, with a slightly satirical air; and the gentleman, looking at her, perceived that her expressed gratitude was not heart-felt.

He colored, and looked annoyed.

"I beg your pardon. I see I have taken too great a liberty, Miss Bruce," he said, huffily; whereupon Marjorie, by no means desiring to offend him seriously, bestowed upon him one of her most captivating glances, her face assuming a grave, penitent look.

"I was only in fun—don't quarrel with me. I'm really very much obliged, Lord Castleton," she said, apologetically; and for a few minutes she was as meek and demure a young damsel as one could wish to see.

Some little indications of an inclination to flirt on the part of the gentleman, however, quickly restored her usual vivacity; and then the couple fell to laughing and talking merrily, and had a wonderfully pleasant half-hour.

The old man's wakening interrupted their *tele-a-tele*. Lord Castleton presently rose to go, graciously protesting against the apology which Mr. Bruce tried to make.

"Why, my sister and I will be running out and in of your house all the autumn, Mr. Bruce. Surely you will not stand upon ceremony with us; you will punish us by making us feel ourselves intolerable nuisances if you do," he said, with his frankest smile, as he shook hands with him.

And then, with a last bright glance into Marjorie's face, he went away, escorted to the hall-door by the old man; and Marjorie, feeling uncomfortably hot, ran away up to her own, pretty chamber, and peeped through the muslin curtains that draped her window.

What a dear, handsome, aristocratic-looking fellow he was! What kind, merry blue eyes he had! What a bonny yellow mustache! How infinitely pleasant it would be to trip through life by the side of such a husband, to enjoy in his company all the joys and honors that appertained to his exalted station? So thought the vain little damsel as, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she stood watching him pass out at the low green gate, and pursue his way along the public road leading to his home.

A sudden remembrance of Miss Lisle's reputed right to the prize she was coveting disturbed her for a little, but she soon recovered her spirits.

The engagement, Lady Dorothea declared, was not of a very binding nature—it had always been understood in the family that the cousins were to marry some day, that was all; and meanwhile both of them acted as if quite unfettered. Surely such a state of matters made it no great harm for her to do her part in the pleasant flirtation Lord Castleton had begun. So ran her thoughts.

She was but a vain, self-engrossed girl at this period of her life, I own. Suffering, refined, and purified; her whole nature, else had she never been heroine of mine.

"*L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose*," she muttered presently, after taking a long and critical survey of herself in the mirror; and then, heaving a comfortable little sigh of pious resignation, she tripped, singing, down stairs to cajole her doting father into his wonted good-humor, which feat, of course, she was not long in accomplishing.

CHAPTER II.

LADY DOROTHEA

Quick, light footsteps in the passage; rap-tap at the half-open parlor door; a half-smothered girlish giggle—such were the sounds that one sultry afternoon, a few weeks after the scene recorded in the last chapter, made Mrs. Bruce pause in her sock-darning, and rise from her seat on the parlor sofa.

"Come in, Lady Dorothea," she said; and then a very pretty, fair-haired young lady ran in, holding out both hands towards her and smiling her most winning smile.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Bruce. I have come to tea, if you'll have me. Mamma and Lord Castleton have driven off to D—, to meet Miss Lisle, who is coming to pay us a long visit, and I am free for two or three hours. Do let me have tea with you. I don't need to be home till it's near dinner-time," she said in a pretty, low-pitched, coaxing voice, as she shook hands; then she dropped down on the sofa, with a sigh of weariness, and, taking off her big sun-hat, fanned herself with it in a pathetically tired way.

"It is so awfully hot, and I've almost run all the way, so that I might have longer to stay. Do ask me to have tea with you," she went on, in a droll, cajoling way, smiling up into Mrs. Bruce's kind, comely face, where she read a look of hesitation.

That hospitable woman looked exceedingly hot and uncomfortable.

"My dear," she said, laying a motherly hand on her youthful ladyship's shoulder, "I'll get you a cup of tea at once; but I can't let you join us at our tea this afternoon, for, you see, there's a friend dropped in on us—young Alton, of Torwood Downs; and, not knowing you would be here, I asked him to stay for tea."

Lady Dorothea laughed, and gave her pretty head a little self-willed toss, looking determined not to be got rid of in this way.

"He won't eat me, I suppose, dear Mrs. Bruce. I'm not going to miss the treat of having tea with you and Mr. Bruce and Marjorie, for the sake of twenty young farmers. Besides, I want to get acquainted with Mr. Alton—I like to know all Lord Castleton's tenants. Do let us all have tea together."

"But Lady Castleton would not like it, my dear; and, indeed, it wouldn't be a proper thing to do," the prudent lady remonstrated.

Lady Dorothea once more tossed her head, and coolly proceeded to untie the knot of blue ribbon which fastened her simple white cloak, saying, with a little sigh, "Don't you know that mamma does not mind the least little bit how I amuse myself, so as I'm happy enough and don't tease her?" And, indeed, the girl spoke the truth.

Knowing this, Mrs. Bruce's motherly heart relented, and she offered no further opposition to her visitor's wish.

"Marjorie's out in the garden gathering her roses, and Mr. Alton's with her. Come away to her room and tidy yourself a bit after your long walk; it will cool you, my dear," she presently said, and the two went up stairs together.

Marjorie's room was of course the prettiest room in the house—a plain, substantial two-story structure, which had already withstood the storms of a hundred winters, and seemed fitted to endure a hundred more, without showing a sign of decay. It had three windows, two looking to the smooth-shaven, tree-enclosed little lawn lying in a semicircle before the house, separated from it by a graveled sweep and a few tastefully laid-out flower-beds; the other to the garden, sloping southward on the other side of the quiet highway which passed by the steading.

There was a cool, green, ferny carpet on the floor, and a paper gay with bunches of rose-buds on the walls. The snowy muslin curtains of the bed and windows were looped up with fresh green ribbons; a white-marble vase filled with sweet-smelling roses stood on the toilet-table. All the windows were open, and a soft breeze stole in, gently moving the draperies. No wonder if Lady Dorothea, just come in from the hot afternoon sunshine, sunk into the one lounging-chair with a sigh of contentment, and looked round her with an approving eye.

"I should always be good if I were your girl and this were my room—I know I should," she said, taking hold of Mrs. Bruce's hand and stroking it as she stood beside her chair, looking down very kindly on the hot, fair, youthful face she had known as a baby-face first of all.

"I should trot about the house and the farm after you and dear old fanny Mr. Bruce all day long, and learn to be a model farmer's wife; and in course of time I should marry a nice, big, manly young farmer who lived near you, and have two or three dear, fat, sunburnt bairnies, whom I should love awfully."

So spoke the little aristocrat, in the perfectly grave, serene tone in which she was in the habit of making the most absurd statements. Strangers used to stare in a nonplussed way when she indulged herself in this favorite diversion; her friends laughed or reproved, according to their several standards of propriety; and her young ladyship, so long as nobody spoke ill-naturedly to her, never troubled herself with cares about the world's opinion. So now Mrs. Bruce smiled and shook her head, no whit surprised.

"As things are, my dear, you must be presented at court and come out properly, like other ladies in your station, and by-and-by marry a landed gentleman—a nobleman, most likely—and settle down as a dignified county lady, with a wide sphere of usefulness in the world. Your prospects are bright enough, most folk would say."

Her young ladyship raised her graceful arms above her head and indulged in a good stretch, smiling good-humoredly up at Mrs. Bruce.

"Heigh-ho!" she yawned. "It don't sound easy for a lazy little thing like me; it would be ever so much jollier to be your Marjorie and marry the big, broad-shouldered young farmer, and have you and Mr. Bruce to help me spoil the funny little sunburnt babies."

"Hush, hush, Lady Dorothea! Motherhood is a solemn thing, and brings duties which we cannot perform aright without constant help from above. Speak soberly if you speak at all on that subject," the matron returned, with one of her quiet, rebuking glances; and the laughing girl immediately altered her tone.

"I am a silly girl, and nobody but you ever tries to make me good. Don't be displeased with me," she said, sweetly, rising and kissing Mrs. Bruce.

That lady patted the blooming round cheek very kindly. She was slow in finding words to express affection; and, ere she was ready to speak, Lady Dorothea, chanced to glance out at a window which gave a view of part of the garden, broke out into enthusiastic speech.

"Ah, Mrs. Bruce, look, what a picture! Isn't Marjorie lovely? And what a handsome, manly fellow is with her! Upon my honor, they look like lovers. Is that really the new tenant of Torwood Downs?"

Mrs. Bruce answered in the affirmative; then, following her ladyship to the window, looked out, with a pleased smile while more raptures were indulged in.

Indeed, it needed not artist's eyes to recognize the beauty of the little scene.

The garden, separated from the house by the quiet highway from which it sloped southward, was a quaint old-world retreat, with broad green walks or close-cut glass besprent with daisies.

Up one of these, bordered on one side by high rose-bushes, and on the other by the yet higher beech hedge, which inclosed the garden, Marjorie and a tall, strongly built young man were sauntering.

Marjorie had a flower-basket slung over her arm, and stopped every other moment to point out a rose to her companion, who, scissors in hand, awaited her orders to cut; then, having severed the fragrant blossom, placed it carefully in the basket.

The couple were evidently enjoying their occupation, for they lingered over it as if unwilling to bring it to a close.

Marjorie selected with great deliberation—her girlish figure, simply draped in white muslin taking all manner of pretty poses, as, holding her head now erect, now sideways, she hung over her bushes; and the gentleman handled his scissors with the like leisureliness of air.

As, while they made their slow progress, now in sunlight, now in shadow, up the green path, the girl kept upturning her fair, arch face to him, his—a dark, thoughtful one, handsome in spite of a want of regularity of feature—lighted up wonderfully, and he looked his best as, a half-smile parting his firmly cut lips, he bent down towards her, apparently unwilling to lose a syllable of her pleasant chatter.

A manly, thoroughly reliable face his was—a face which one might seek in trial and perplexity, secure of finding honest and wise counsel from its owner.

Mrs. Bruce's face grew thoughtful as she watched the young couple.

"They're a well-matched pair, Lady Dorothea," she said; and her ladyship fancied that she detected a little tremulousness in the ordinarily steady voice.

She put up her face and kissed her on the instant, innocent wonder in her blue eyes.

"You don't think Marjorie loves him—you don't think she is going to marry and leave you already?" she asked, jumping at conclusions in her usual droll fashion; and her tone recalled Mrs. Bruce to herself.

"I ask no better lot for my girl than to be the wife of just such a good, true-hearted man, my dear," she said, with her own pleasant smile.

"Even though he were but a plain farmer?" pursued Lady Dorothea, a little dubiously. She began to fear that her friend Marjorie's notions of a suitable partner might be very different from her mother's.

"Her father is but a plain farmer—why should she marry out of her own class? Nothing but unhappiness is to be expected from unequal marriages. It has never for one single moment been my wish that our girl should leave the station she was born in."

Mrs. Bruce spoke very earnestly, and looked steadily into the girl's face, as if desirous to impress her with a sense of her perfect sincerity in thus speaking.

A vague suspicion that Lady Dorothea, or rather that her family, might fancy that Lord Castleton's frequent visits to the farm-house would give rise to ambitious scheming on the part of its inmates, prompted this speech. The suspicion heightened when the girl, without moving her grave eyes from Mrs. Bruce's face, asked, simply, "But Marjorie looks higher, does she not?"

But yesterday she had stood at the same window and watched Marjorie and Lord Castleton waudering about the garden in a lover-like way—she had heard their voices mingle in a love-song as the girl sat at the piano and looked up at him as he bent over her with eyes full of admiration. It all came back to her memory now, and her face flushed in answer to this direct appeal.

"I do not know—you may ask her, Lady Dorothea," she answered, moving away from the window.

Just then Marjorie chanced to look up, and, perceiving Lady Dorothea, intimated by a few graceful pantomimic gestures that she would be with her presently.

So, glad of an excuse to escape, Mrs. Bruce left the two girls to entertain each other.

"Wicked little flirt!" was Lady Dorothea's first greeting; and, as she spoke, she fixed her blue eyes on her friend's face, trying with all her might to read it.

"Naughty little slattern!" was Marjorie's response, as her quick eye noticed a stray yellow tress which had escaped from its proper place on her young ladyship's graceful head (indeed, but for a conscientious maid she would seldom have been presentable, so little interest did she take in her own appearance). First of all, let me make you respectable," she added, in haste, perceiving, from the admonishing way in which her companion raised her forefinger and shook it at her, that the attack was about to be followed up.

"Oh, dear me, what does it matter?" Lady Dorothea sighed, lazily, unwilling to abandon her lounging position; but, conscious of looking guilty, Marjorie stepped quickly behind her, and, after a preliminary kiss, began a vigorous brushing of the offending yellow hair.

While thus engaged she tried to allure her into talking of other subjects than the one which she saw she wished to introduce; but her ladyship was good-humoredly unmanageable.

"I want to know all about young Mr. Alton, and I won't talk about anything else till you've satisfied my curiosity. You've been deceiving me shamefully, getting so intimate with him and never telling me. Why, you looked quite like lovers as you came up the garden."

Marjorie gave a very cross tug to her friend's hair; then, as she gave a little cry of pain, in quick repentance she stopped, and, coming from behind the chair, knelt down by her side and took her hand.

"I hurt you on purpose. I'm a very rude, cross

bear of a girl, and I wish you would scold me well, Lady Dorothea."

The tone of contrition and humility went straight to the kind, simple heart.

"I'm not clever at scolding; I'll rather heap coals of fire on your head by giving you a kiss. There, now we're friends again."

A kiss exchanged, the brush was taken up again; and Lady Dorothea, who had no lack of quiet persistence, returned to the charge quite undauntedly.

"Tell me all about him, now, like a good girl, Madge; I'll never be at peace till you do, you know," she only recommenced; and Marjorie, thus urged, answered her in a bantering strain, though her look and tone were somewhat cross.

"I am sorry I can't give you the dates of his birth and baptism, Lady Dorothea—I suspect him of being at least thirty years old. He has had a college education—took high honors, indeed, and might have been famous by this time, possibly; but, an elder brother dying, thought it his duty to come home and join his father in farming; has never repented the sacrifice, but lives in amazing harmony with the said old incubus, and a cross old housekeeper who has belonged to the family for generations; is now settled down with his interesting ménage at Torwood Downs, and consequently has a right to expect ordinary neighborly kindness from us. Is your ladyship's curiosity yet satisfied? If not, I would advise you to apply for further particulars to the cross housekeeper, from whom I have derived all this fund of knowledge while making a call with mamma on the old Mr. Alton. There," ended the girl, as Lady Dorothea kept thoughtfully silent, "my tale is told, and your hair is dressed to perfection. Let us go down stairs."

As she spoke she came forward from behind the easy chair and took up her position before the mirror, surveying herself from head to foot with an engrossed air.

Lady Dorothea, without stirring, watched her, and smiled in a lazily admiring way, as having fastened a pink rose in her dark hair, Marjorie presently turned round to her and asked her opinion of its effect.

"You don't care a bit how I look, Lady Dorothea!" was her pettish exclamation, as her friend gave her no audible answer.

"That is a fib, Madge; your beauty is a perpetual enjoyment to me," her ladyship answered, in a tone of heart-felt sincerity. "Only just now I was thinking—thinking of what you have been telling me—that young man must be a noble fellow. I don't know how you can laugh at him so. I should be proud of a husband like that, Maja."

Marjorie turned sharply round from the mirror and gave a quick, suspicious glance into her friend's face.

"Shall I bring him to your ladyship's feet?" she laughed, a *soi-disant* of scorn in her voice.

Lady Dorothea kept her sweetly pensive air, and gazed with solemn blue eyes at Marjorie.

"You remember what the poet says, Maja," she went on, in an abstracted way: "'Kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood.'"

She spoke in all innocence; but Marjorie's conscience made a coward of her, and she fancied that her own ambitious hopes were being rebuked. In this belief she made a saucy courtesy, flashing one of her quick glances at her companion as she said, satirically: "Moral: Be content with the lowly station in which a wise Providence has placed you, Marjorie Bruce, and gratefully accept the first respectable farmer who offers you his honest, horny hand."

At last Lady Dorothea perceived that there was something seriously amiss with her friend. Underneath the lightness of her tone she discerned a littleness which was most unusual. Acting on kindly impulse, she jumped up and kissed her, in spite of a pettish remonstrance.

"Why, Maja love, I think you are the loveliest, most charming girl I ever saw in my life. I think you would be an ornament to any rank; and I'd rejoice to see you made a duchess, if your heart was set on being one; only, you know, you have always stoutly maintained that you wished to marry in"—she hesitated, afraid of wounding Marjorie's pride—"what you call your own sphere."

Marjorie's face brightened instantly, and she put a caressing arm round Lady Dorothea, though her tone was still a little impatient, as she replied, "I very seldom say exactly what I mean, Lady Dorothea; I fancied you knew me better than to suppose I did."

"Then you wish to marry a duke, Miss Marjorie?"

"If your ladyship pleases."

"Wouldn't an earl do, Beauty?"

"By no means; that would be a sad downcome to my ambition."

Marjorie laughed and blushed suspiciously as she made this reply; but, as she had once more sought the mirror, and was trifling with the rose in her hair, Lady Dorothea did not notice her confusion.

"Very well," continued that innocent lady, in her frankest, kindest tones: "when Cousin Ernestine marries Herbert, which will certainly be some of these days, I shall make them ask you and me on a long visit, and we shall all four do our very best to trap a duke for you. Will that promise content you, dear?"

"Oh, perfectly! You are an adept in the art of comforting, Lady Dorothea," returned Marjorie, with a laugh which did not sound merry. Then, affecting a good-humor which she did not feel, she carried her friend downstairs to the parlor, where tea awaited them.

Here they found nobody but Mrs. Bruce, who, telling them that her husband had taken their visitor away to inspect his stock, tried to prevail on Lady Dorothea to have a cup of tea before their return. Her young ladyship would by no means agree to this; and when the two gentlemen presently returned, welcomed them both with especial graciousness. But for Marjorie, who, in revenge for the annoyance she had un-

dergone, was studiously distant in her demeanor towards Mr. Alton, everybody would have enjoyed the daintily set-out tea which Mrs. Bruce dispensed with a quiet, kindly hospitality. As it was, that gentleman, already an adept in interpreting the varying moods of the wilful little Beauty, perceived that she was offended with him, and was duly troubled in spirit, though he had sufficient self-command to disguise his perturbation.

When, soon after tea, Lady Dorothea made her adieu, Marjorie insisted on walking home with her, and Mr. Alton did not long delay his own departure. Miss Maja, as her father and mother remarked with satisfaction, looked somewhat annoyed when, on her return, an hour afterward, she heard this. When Lord Castleton was not by, she had no objections to exert her powers of fascination on this thoroughly well-bred and presentable young man, whose very gravity and earnestness of character had a certain charm for her.

"How many strings does my lassie want to her bow?" Mr. Bruce asked, putting his arm round her and drawing her down on his knee, as she came up to the easy-chair where he sat enjoying a meditative pipe; and at the sound of the tender, loving old voice the girl's ill-humor vanished.

"As many as she can get, old dad—not one less," she laughed with a roguish shake of her pretty head.

Mrs. Bruce, sitting at the window, busy over some needle-work, turned round, and shook her head in rebuke of her unwise husband's question.

"I wonder where they're to come from, father?" John Alton seems to me the only marriageable man about the neighborhood Marjorie is like to see much of," she said, with an admonishing air.

The spirit of mischief was once more too strong for Miss Marjorie.

"Except Lord Castleton, mammy," she said, saucily, with another toss of her head; and, as she spoke, her color heightened and her dark eyes sparkled with the excitement of this daring retort.

Mr. Bruce looked from his daughter to his wife, and rubbed his hands in silent enjoyment of the fun.

His wife, on the contrary, looked seriously displeased.

"Lord Castleton is out of your station altogether, Marjorie. I'd as soon expect you to marry one of your father's ploughmen as I'd expect him to marry a plain farmer's daughter," she said, with rare asperity; and her usual steady, composed voice trembled.

Mr. Bruce was about to interpose, but Marjorie was too quick for him.

"Jamie Scott is the handsomest, manliest-looking young fellow I've seen yet," she laughed (naming one of the farm laborers distinguished by his good looks); "I'll, maybe, run off with him some of these days. Who knows?"

She would have gone on in the same strain but for her father's interference. With a clouded brow he addressed to her a few words of reprimand, which quickly banished the color from her cheeks and set her lip trembling. Her father's rare displeasure always hurt her sorely, for she was keenly alive to praise or blame from those she loved best; and during the rest of that evening she did not recover her spirits.

CHAPTER III.

TORWOOD HOUSE.

JOHN ALTON set off from the farm-house with a clouded brow and a step that lacked its wonted spring. For a short time he felt acutely troubled; but as he plodded on along the peaceful tree-bordered road, breathing in the freshness of the lovely July evening, his thoughts gradually resolved themselves into definite snags.

At last he recognized as a fact what for a week or two past he had suspected with uneasiness—that he was no longer master of himself; that the caprices of a pretty damsel he had chanced to meet some half a dozen times had power to disturb his peace of mind and ruffle his temper. He was *in love*, and he could give himself no satisfactory reasons for being in love. Strange to say, this man of thirty years had hitherto known nothing of the grand passion by personal experience. He had cherished a secret pride, indeed, in the belief that he would never succumb to the prevalent weakness of falling in love.

His home affections, very strong and tender, he had always believed thoroughly reasonable; and from his earliest manhood he had resolved that the best love of his heart, if ever bestowed, should be given only to one who had such qualities of mind and heart as would satisfy his judgment.

"A perfect woman, nobly planned, to warn, to comfort, to command," had been his ideal on the rare occasions when he thought of woman-kind at all; and now behold his prudent resolutions given to the winds, his calm judgment set at defiance, and his life's happiness at the mercy of an undeniably vain and coquettish girl of eighteen.

It was not a pleasant discovery for a man of his mental and moral caliber, and he did not reconcile his mind to it without a painful inward conflict.

Only after a hurried walk of many miles did he regain his wonted self-command sufficiently to make it possible for him to face his old father at home without awakening his anxiety by a lack of his usual good spirits. John Alton knew himself to be but a very poor actor, and he was very tender over the old man's peace of mind.

Old Mr. Alton was sitting smoking in the twilight when his son entered the parlor. Supper stood ready on the table; but he had delayed eating his solitary meal in faint hope of having his usual companion.

Very deep and tender was the love he bore this one son left to cheer his old age. Seldom, indeed, does such a heart-union as theirs exist between man and man. Strangers were amazed by it, though they themselves considered it the least surprising thing in the world.

So now, coming in after several hours' absence, John Alton glanced uneasily round upon the half-dark room, the neglected supper-tray, the bent old figure in the arm-chair by the empty fire-place, and, in spite of his father's cheerful greeting, his conscience—a very exacting master—rebuked him for having been selfishly engrossed.

"Why, father," he says, in a tone of kind concern—and, as he speaks, he lays his hand on the old man's shoulder—"you're moping in the dark—you've had no supper. I'll not leave you in an evening again, if this is the way you attend to your comforts."

Taking his pipe from his mouth, his father looks at him with unutterable tenderness and satisfaction in his eyes. A keenly cut, refined old face his is, and never does it look so lovable as when it turns to his son's.

"Sit down, laddie," he says, giving him a little playful shove; and then, as with brightened look the young man draws a chair beside him and seats himself, he goes on:

"Every man to his taste, John. I like the quiet room and my pipe and the gloamin', and thoughts o' auld lang-syne, as is natural to my years, and you like a bit o' change and brightness and a bonny maid's chatter. What for shouldn't ye? It befits your time o' life, lad."

John Alton colors under the steady look his father bestows on him, but says nothing.

Taking his silence as assent, the old man goes on, a peaceful smile illuminating his thin features.

"I like to fancy you're out courting, John. It's your turn now; I've had mine, and am content. Make your hay while the sun shines. Youth flies by like a shadow, and naught will make amends for the loss o' innocent youthin' joys. Take ye a ye can seize, lad; for very sure am I the Lord that made ye never meant that ye should walk sadly through the glorious days o' your youth."

Old Alton's voice has an unwonted tremor in it; and, as he speaks, he lays his hand on the young man's sleeve, the better to impress him with his seriousness.

And the strangely stirred heart yearns to unburden itself, secure of finding sympathy with its feelings in one who speaks thus lovingly; yet so unselfish is it that a remembrance of the long-delayed supper checks the utterance it craves.

"You must have your supper before we speak o' anything so exciting as womankind, father," John says, rising and lighting a lamp which stands upon the table. Then he places a chair for his father, and, sitting down close by him, proceeds to attend to his wants with a kindly solicitude which no fond woman could surpass.

No wonder the aged eyes watch his motions with such complacency. He is indeed a son to be proud of—so strong, physically and mentally, yet so gentle; so thoroughly manly in look and bearing, yet so childlike in the purity of his moral nature.

"Ay, ay, lad; 'every dog has his day,' his father resumes, after he has made some progress with his supper. He is determined to find out whether he is correct in his surmises as to those frequent visits to the Bruces.

"Another slice of the cold beef, father? See, I've cut it like a wafer," is John's response, and with an air of peremptoriness he lays it on his plate; then, replenishing his glass from the beer-jug, he watches him eat and drink, declining to enter upon any but indifferent subjects till he has got him to make a fair supper, though he himself only plays with his knife and fork—a very rare occurrence, I own.

Only when the old man has quite finished will he permit him to bring on the *taps* the subject which is uppermost in both their minds.

Then, reseating him in his favorite easy-chair, settling his footstool, and filling him a fresh pipe, he draws a chair close beside him, and declares he is ready for a crack.

His companion begins by a jocular remonstrance, accompanying it by a loving, content look into his face.

"It's easy having your own way when you've none but dotin' old folks to manage, John; when you get a bonny young wife, you'll find it a different matter."

John folds his arms, as he has a trick of doing when in a thoughtful mood, and looks steadily before him, a grave smile relaxing his mouth.

"If I ever do marry, father, I shall be able to manage my wife."

"Or she you, John." And a queer, humorous light gleams in the wise old eyes that have watched the ways of womankind near threescore years and ten.

But John is busy with his own thoughts, and does not notice the retort.

For several minutes the monotonous tick, tick, of the old-fashioned time-piece on the mantel-shelf is the only sound that breaks the silence of the room; then the young man speaks in strangely tremulous tones, and his hand clasps his father's, as he looks into his face with infinite love and yearning.

"Father," he says, hurriedly, "a man's life is but dreary work if the woman he loves will not share it with him. I have seen the one woman in all the world for me. Give me your blessing; wish me godspeed in my wooing."

Right heartily is the wished-for benediction spoken—a very loving glance accompanying it.

"God bless you, my lad, and give you your heart's desire! I'd be a glad and proud old man could I see you mated wi' just such a wife as your mother was to me. I could na wish you a better." And he hastily passes his thin old hand over eyes which have grown

misty as he thinks of the quiet, plain little woman whose kind, busy hands were folded in the long death-sleep five-and-twenty years ago. "You've been the best son that ever breathed, and I'll warrant you'll be the best husband. God prosper ye in your wooing, lad."

John Alton smiles and shakes his head—his father's enthusiastic praises never fail to amuse him.

"I doubt nobody else sees me with your eyes, father. I've reason to fear I'm but a glum, tongue-tied fellow, in the estimation of most womankind, I know."

"Marjorie Bruce can speak for two, I'm thinking John."

This home-thrust musters the color to the young man's dark face; he smiles and drops his eyes.

"Would she please you as a daughter-in-law? Not that it is the least likely she would marry me," he hastens to add, with a little sigh.

His father, who has withdrawn his pipe from his lips, puts it back and smokes contemplatively for several minutes, his son watching him in patient silence, no whit displeased by this slowness of reply, so entire is his loving trust in him.

At last the answer comes, very thoughtfully given.

"She seems to be a bonny, blithesome young thing—flighty a bit, but years might mend that. If she pleases you for a wife, she'll please me for a daughter, never fear."

Another sigh escapes the lover, who has cherished a faint hope that Marjorie's faults exist only in his own fancy—that he has been over-exacting in his requirements.

"You don't know her very well yet, father," he says, just a little testily; and, then he looks ashamed of his impatience, and proceeds gently, "she has the warmest heart in the world, it seems to me. I have noticed how the cottar children hang about her skirts, how the very dogs about the farm brighten up when they hear her step. She must be good; her little faults are but natural to her years and her indulgent upbringing."

Though John Alton speaks in a low voice of enforced calm, his father sees that his eyes have an unwonted light; the muscles of his mouth quiver with suppressed emotion, and the old man hastens to speak reassuringly.

"My lad," he says, with much tenderness and solemnity of look and tone—and he keeps his eyes on his face as he speaks—"still waters run deep." You've come o' a race little given to changeful fancies. I reckon you've met your first and last love, and she's a winsome, innocent young thing. If ye can win her heart, little fear but ye'll find it easy to teach her wisdom."

A silent, eloquent hand-pressure, a grateful look, reward this speech; then old Alton resumes his pipe, and once more relapses into meditation.

"Light your pipe, John—I like to have ye wiffin' awa' opposite me. Our after-supper smoke's an institution we'll no change till the wife comes home," he presently says, a tender, humorous smile overspreading his face.

"If then, father," remarks his son, with a reassuring nod; and when the two men sit smoking in sociable silence till bedtime.

For a long time John Alton vouchsafed no further mention of Marjorie's name, although he continued to make frequent visits to her home; nor did his father ask a question regarding her; yet, in spite of their reticence, a more than wonted lovingness of look and tone, an occasional mute hand-pressure, showed that neither of them had forgotten that evening's conversation.

CHAPTER IV.

LORD CASTLETON AND HIS FIANCEE.

"NESSIE, look up for one minute; I want to ask you a question—a serious one, mind."

It is Lord Castleton who speaks, and his cousin Ernestine who is thus addressed.

They two are alone in the drawing-room—a long, lofty, quaintly furnished apartment, where firelight and twilight reign in spite of the score of candles burning in little clusters here and there through the room. He is standing leaning upon the mantel-piece; and she is sitting on a low chair in front of the hearth, where a pleasant-scented wood fire is blazing. The firelight is triumphant in this spot, and is playing gleefully about their two figures, and casting fantastic shadows of them upon the walls and ceiling. It is a kindly, soft light, and touches lovingly not only the tall, handsome, fair-bearded man whom nature has endowed with an enviable portion of personal graces, but the irregularly featured, dark-skinned girl who at his bidding lifts up a pair of soft brown eyes, and ceases to fondle the little King Charles lying on her lap.

"Why must I look up, Herbert?" she says. She has a pleasant, low-toned voice and a gentle, modest way of speaking which have a certain charm, although she is quite unconscious of it.

"Because you have such nice eyes, Nessie; such kind, true, honest eyes," he says, smiling down upon her, and regarding her with a steadfast, friendly gaze. He was not in love with her, according to the usual acceptance of the phrase; yet he had a certain reverent, admiring tenderness for her which made such speeches natural. She was his cousin. She was nice in his critical eyes; she liked him better than anybody else; and she had at least ten thousand pounds a year.

A little color brightens up her pale face, and a smile of pleased surprise passes over it.

"You'll be telling me I'm grown pretty next, Herbert," she says, dropping her eyes, and once more resuming her fondling of the dog on her lap.

He shakes his head and answers readily, "No, Nessie, why should I? There is something better than pretti-

ness about you—a charm that I can't define. I think it must be sheer goodness."

It is her turn to shake her head now. "Ah, no, Herbert!" she responds, upturning perfectly grave eyes to his face; then she adds, "But you have forgotten your question."

He moves nearer her chair, and, folding his arms on his breast, stands before her, steadfastly regarding her still.

"Ought not cousins who have known each other all their lives, and who meet, too, after a long separation, as you and I met to-day, to be allowed something more than a cool handshake which any acquaintance of yesterday might expect? Honestly, now, Nessie, ought not they?"

She has a pretty head, gracefully turned, and crowned with coils of soft, dark hair, which her maid has passed a couple of hours in arranging to her satisfaction this evening; though when Lord Castleton is not to see her she is easily satisfied with her appearance. It sinks low over the doggie now, and her faint blush again beautifies her pale face. She has no gift of repartee; and she sits silent, smiling shyly, while the firelight plays about her slim little drooping figure in its soft falling draperies of pink silk.

And so, after a few moments of silence, he comes behind her chair, and in his easy, graceful, kindly way bends over her and kisses her in a very lover-like fashion; after which indulgence he draws a chair beside hers, and sits soberly staring into the fire.

They are sitting there ten minutes afterward, enjoying a pleasant chat about his travels, when Lady Dorothea enters the drawing-room. She comes smilingly up to her cousin, and, refusing the chair Lord Castleton offers, throws herself on the rug at her feet.

"I have been naughty, and that dreadful tyrant Jackson has been scolding me; that is why I have been away from you so long, Nessie," she says, in her pretty, warbling voice.

Nessie smiles and says nothing, but the gentleman is not so reticent.

"Keep your mind easy, Dolly, my love. We have not missed you a bit. We have had what our Yankee brothers call a 'good time'; have not we, Nessie?" he says, laying an appealing hand on his cousin's shoulder; whereupon, coloring faintly, as is her wont when confused, she tries to change the subject.

"And why was your maid scolding you, Dolly?" she questions, gently pushing away his lordship's hand, and looking down into the fair upturned face of the maiden at her feet.

"Oh, because I had run into the painting-room to put a few finishing touches to my portrait of Marjorie Bruce (I must show it to you to-morrow morning), and I got paint on my sash somehow or other. Jackson was horribly ill-natured about it, and I have had to promise never, never again to meddle with a brush after I have dressed for dinner," Lady Dorothea explains, in her ludicrously plaintive tone.

"Good little girl," laughs her brother; and Miss Lisle joins softly in his laugh. Lady Dorothea's abject submission to this maid of hers has long been a standing joke in the family.

"By-the-by, how is Marjorie? Do you see much of her nowadays?" asked Miss Lisle, who has until lately been engrossed with the whirl of a London season, and is in blissful ignorance of much that has been going on at Torwood.

Lord Castleton, who is once more standing leaning on the mantel-piece, shifts his position a little and looks hard at his sister, with a faint hope that she may read in his expression his wish to keep Miss Lisle from knowing the full extent of their intimacy with Marjorie.

In vain: Lady Dorothea smiles up at him with provoking good-humor, and plunges unhesitatingly into the subject.

"Oh, yes, Nessie; she is constantly here. We could never get on without Marjorie. Herbert and I would have died of ennui long ago but for her; would not we, Herbert?"

The gentleman fidgets suspiciously, and gives a cross tug to his mustache; nor does he lift his eyes from the fire as he says, in a disparaging tone, "She is an amusing little thing, and of course one is glad of some civilized being to talk to in this sleepy place."

Honest Lady Dorothea perceives, without in the least understanding, the want of enthusiasm in this response to her appeal, and looks up, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, at the speaker.

"Why, Herbert," she says, in rather an aggrieved voice, "you speak as if anybody would do to fill Marjorie's place with us—actually anybody at all amusing—and you know they would not. She is better than amusing, she is kind and good and nice every way; and I always thought you liked her immensely," she adds, somewhat reproachfully.

Miss Lisle, who, to the detriment of her own peace of mind, is gifted with quick perception, is listening eagerly, though she does not raise her eyes. There is a momentary pause; then Lord Castleton says, more crossly than there seems any excuse for, "I wish you would not use such absurdly exaggerated language, Dorothea; at least, for my sake, keep it to convey your own sentiments in. I like all the Bruces, of course; but there is no occasion to go into raptures over them and bore Ernestine, who can't be in the least interested in your subject."

It is something quite novel to be snubbed in this way by lazy, good-humored Lord Castleton; and Lady Dorothea stares at him in pained wonderment.

"I think you are very unkind," she says, presently, feeling a strong inclination to cry; yet even this reproach does not touch the offender's usually soft heart.

"Do give me a song, Nessie; it is so long since I have heard you sing," is his next speech, after a few

moments of uncomfortable silence have passed; and, though he sees a couple of big tears roll down his sister's pretty, fair face as she perceives herself thus ignored, he makes no attempt whatever to comfort her.

Miss Lisle it is who acts the good Samaritan, kissing her and whispering a kind little speech of excuse and apology ere she follows him to the piano, which, with more noise than is necessary, he has opened.

"Never mind him, Dolly dear," she says, sweetly; "we are all a little cross and unreasonable at times, you know. I am sure he will be sorry for having vexed you, and will tell you so himself."

And then the music begins; and Lady Dorothea, who has great difficulty in distinguishing "God save the Queen" from "Old Hundred," feels utterly forlorn, and after a little while slips out of the room, dismally sure that she will not be missed there. Knowing that her mother is at her usual evening occupation, reading or writing in the library, and being desperately in want of somebody to talk to, she seeks her there—the first time she has done so since her return from school.

The library, particularly in candle-light, is an awe-inspiring, gloomy apartment, and her heart sinks to yet lower depths as she enters it. Lady Castleton, seated at a desk at the upper end of the long, dimly lighted room, a formidable pile of manuscripts lying beside her, rises, pen in hand, and looks startled, for seldom indeed does a visitor interrupt her solitary labors. She is a beautiful woman still, though the supreme beauty of youth is hers no more. She has a stately bearing, a finely cut, pallid face, lighted up by fine black eyes, and abundance of soft black hair, simply coiled round her well-formed head. There is a prevailing expression of combined weariness and *hauteur* about her whole air which is not calculated to attract ordinary mortals such as this easy-going little daughter of hers, who now comes up to her with her most subdued step.

"Do I disturb you, mamma? I only came in to see you for a little," she says, timidly.

Lady Castleton gives a little sigh of annoyance, though she smiles faintly, and says, not unkindly.

"Oh no, Dolly; sit down," pointing to a chair beside her desk. Then she resumes her own seat and lays down her pen, thinking ruefully of the already half-forgotten sentence which on Lady Dorothea's entrance she was on the point of committing to paper.

"And how are Herbert and Ernestine amusing themselves?" she asks, as the girl sits soberly down. The indifference in her tone is not meant to be evident; yet even slow perceiving Lady Dorothea is aware of it, and consequently feels tongue-tied.

"They are getting on swimmingly," she replies; then conscious of having used a slangy expression, she adds, hastily, "They are at the piano singing to one another—at least, Bessie is singing to him."

Lady Castleton smiles and looks rather less bored. (She has now given up the sentence for lost, and resigned herself to the probable loss of a quarter of an hour.)

"And you found yourself *de trop*, poor Dolly! and are roving about in search of amusement?" she says, in a faintly satirical way, with one of her keen glances.

The girl assents with a wistful, answering glance, which has the effect of making her mother thoroughly uncomfortable.

Alas! how few of us are strangers to that keen pang of remorseful shame which is the penalty of acknowledged duties neglected—of God-bestowed opportunities of endearing ourselves to others scornfully ignored!

"You must get Marjorie to come up to-morrow evening, Dolly; then you'll be independent of Herbert and Ernestine," she says, with cold politeness; and her hand passes over her eyes with a gesture betokening weariness, which her daughter interprets as a signal of dismissal. She rises at once, saying, timidly, "I must not hinder you longer, mamma: I shall only say good-night." And Lady Castleton does not bid her remain.

Yet as she kisses her (they always kiss each other twice a day) she says, with considerate kindness, "I shall not want any of the horses out to-morrow, Dolly; tell Herbert so; and see if he can't arrange a picnic or something of that sort for you young folk. We must not let Ernestine weary, you know."

Lady Dorothea thanks her, brightening up a little, and hesitates an instant whether or not to give her an extra kiss; but, perceiving that she is already pen in hand, and that an abstracted look is dawning in her eyes, she decides upon a quiet and speedy withdrawal.

CHAPTER V.

A PRETTY HOYDEN.

A PICNIC on a small scale had been resolved upon by the young trio at Torwood ere they went to bed, and its details are now being settled at the breakfast-table. The sky is of a glorious blue, the air is freshened by a delicious west wind, and the young people are in high spirits. Their voices fill the sunny morning-room with jubilant jest and laughter as spontaneous as is the song of the birds outside. Lady Castleton, seemingly engrossed in her *Times* listens to them and is faintly gladdened. The sunshine streaming in at the open windows; the fresh dewy lawn beyond, where the birds are holding their jubilee amidst the branches of the tall old tree; the youthful gayety—all combine to make her less melancholy than is her wont.

"And what is the latest edition of your plan, young people?" she says, folding up her paper and rising; she has already lingered long past her usual time for leaving the breakfast-room. Her rare, sweet smile is on her face (she has a vein of sweetness in her nature, but it has, alas! been little wrought), and they all three look at her in pleased wonderment.

Lord Castleton explains:

"We start in an hour—pick up Marjorie Bruce, as Dolly wants her with us—then go on to Crawford Priory and get Crawford to join us (I half promised to go over there this morning, so he is likely to be at home) we'll let him turn out a smart drag he has got lately, and drive two of the girls—then off for The Cottage"—(The Cottage is a seaside retreat set apart by the late Earl of Castleton's will for the dowager countesses, "stroll about the woods; eat our lunch in the coolest spot we can find; then home to dinner at eight, if you will let us have it at that hour.")

Lady Castleton nods assent.

"Don't get upset or drowned, any of you. Dinner would be spoiled for the survivors, if anything of that sort happened," she says lightly. Then her son opens the door for her, and she glides away in her quiet, stately fashion.

"And how about the fodder," says Lady Dorothea as the door shuts behind her; and she puckers up her pretty rosy face and stares with comical gravity up in her brother's face, tugging at his coat sleeves the while.

"Care killed a cat," Dorothea, my treasure," he says, solemnly. Then he adds, "Keep your mind easy; I shall go off at once to Mrs. Fenton's room [the old housekeeper], and she and I will cater for you to the best of our ability."

The girl claps her hands and turns to her cousin, who sits demurely smiling. "Let us all three go, Nessie; it will be good fun. Herbert and the dear old woman have such droll talks! Do come along."

Miss Lisle, who is not gifted with the easy manner which makes her cousins adored by their inferiors, declines smilingly; but Lord Castleton interposes. "Do, Nessie," he says, persuasively, going up to her and taking her hand; "do; I want you." Whereupon she yields, blushing becomingly, and they all depart, with more simple jesting and light-hearted laughter.

The glorious day has gladdened Marjorie Bruce's light heart to such an extreme that she can scarcely find vent for the exuberance of her spirits, though she has been indulging herself in a variety of diversions wofully unbecoming her young lady estate; she has been in the milk-house chattering to the stolid, red-cheeked dairy-maid until she has roused her into a state of mind approaching liveliness; she has been in the stack-yard hunting for undiscovered hens' nests in nooks which can only be reached by daring climbing of ladders and imperiling of life and limb; she has clambered up into her once familiar perch amidst the pleasant greenery of the old elm tree that guards the entrance to the garden, and has sat singing there with all that gay abandon of the lark warbling overhead in the fleecy cloudlet which the wind playfully chases over the azure sky. And now—oh! disgrace indelible!—the eyes of Lord Castleton, of Lady Dorothea, of Miss Lisle, of the dignified coachman and footman, behold her, as seated on the top of a hay-cart piled with the last load of hay, she is riding home in inglorious comfort.

At Lord Castleton's bidding the coachman reins in his fine pair of grays; at Marjorie's, the uncouth-looking old laborer, who is her charioteer, stops his heavy-footed, powerful cart-horse, and a parley is held.

Miss Marjorie's cheeks are of a fine damask; her dark hair has been ruffled by the wind, and her pink cotton gown direly creased and dirtied by the tomboy diversions in which the morning has been spent; the carriage folks are cool-skinned, carefully dressed in simple, elegant, morning attire, and look provokingly fresh and unembarrassed.

The contrast strikes Maja, and makes her for once seem tongue-tied and shy; yet, truth to tell, she has very little need to feel abashed.

They are all admiring her—all, from Lord Castleton to the footman. The very scent of the hay on which she sits throned is charming; she herself is bewitchingly beautiful as she blushes and smiles from under the shade of a droll gipsy-hat, adorned with a wreath of pink wild roses, culled from the hedge that inclosed the hay-field in which she had been passing a joyous half-hour. The big, lumbering vehicle, the sleek, heavy-footed horse, round whose neck a garland of the same wild roses has been hung; the slouching, heavy-built old rustic, are but accessories that enhance the grace of her central figure by their lack of its attractions.

She is told the object of their expedition, and gives a rather hesitating expression to her thanks for the invitation to join them, making a faint resistance, which is speedily overcome.

"You must let us take you home; it will save a quarter of an hour or so, and we have no time to lose," Lord Castleton presently intimates; and, as he speaks, he jumps out of the open carriage and goes forward to the cart.

Marjorie crimsoned, and laughs her fresh young laugh as she slips deftly down from her sweet-scented throne, and, pausing a moment to plant her pretty little feet on a shaft, springs lightly to the ground without touching his lordship's hand extended to help her.

"You would have been much kinder if you had driven past, Lord Castleton," she says, in a low tone, with an arch look at him, as she descends.

"The man would have been more than mortal who had driven past you, Miss Bruce, as you looked just now perched on your hay-cart," he answers, in the same low voice; and, as he looks at her, he feels nearer falling in love than he has ever yet done in his young life. Then they both get into the carriage and recover their usual tone of voice.

It is arranged that Marjorie shall be taken home, allowed half an hour to dress in, and then picked up by the carriage, which during that time is to take the rest of the party to a picturesque little glen in the immediate neighborhood.

In a few minutes she is rushing up stairs to her bedroom, eager to begin her dressing.

Mrs. Bruce, who has been hastily summoned to assist her, feels vaguely troubled by her haste and excitement.

"I do wish you had made an excuse, Marjorie," she says, in a vexed way. "They mean kindly, but they are doing you no real kindness. Folk will speak ill-naturedly about all this attention to us—it's but natural they should wonder at it."

She is busy brushing her daughter's hair as she speaks, and she makes no attempt at seriously imposing any obstacle to her going (knowing well, indeed, that such an attempt would be useless); so that young lady takes this protest meekly.

"Ah, mamma," she says, turning round on her with one of her most winning smiles, "it is such a glorious day! I am so happy! Let me be—don't I know it won't last forever?—let me have my little season of pleasant summer-time undisturbed." And Mrs. Bruce relinquishes, with a sigh, her intention of speaking her mind more fully at present.

"I wish Mr. Crawford had not been going with you, Marjorie, I don't know much about him, but they were never a good set, these Crawfords," is the only other objection she proffers, and that is when her daughter is putting on her gloves as she stands at the garden-gate looking out for the carriage.

Marjorie laughs, and looks gayly indifferent. "I shall beware of him, mammy dear," she says. Then her friends drive up, and she is whirled away.

That half-hour devoted to dressing has wonderfully transformed the gipsy-looking damsel of the hay-cart; and Miss Lisle, who is less accustomed than the rest to her metamorphoses, looks at her in surprise. Her white-muslin dress fits her to perfection; the lace that ruffles her pretty neck and wrists is as costly and as carefully got up as is her own, though she is an heiress; her little hands are encased in faultless Parisian gloves of a pale primrose shade; a charming little white-tulle bonnet, trimmed with pink rose-buds, crowns her graceful head—she looks undeniably like a youthful *élégante*; and Miss Lisle, who had hitherto disdained to be jealous of her cousin's rural *protégée* and companion, is forced to acknowledge inwardly that such jealousy would not be preposterous in the eyes of the generality of womankind.

Miss Lisle, however, is too gentle and good to indulge any such feeling without very good cause; and to-day she is quite kind and friendly in manner to Marjorie, who, having a shrewd perception of the difficulties into which imprudence on her part might plunge Lord Castleton, is for once on her good behaviour.

They are all sociably gay and friendly, and arrive at Crawford Priory in the pleasantest frame of mind imaginable.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PICNIC.

THE chickens and champagne have been duly enjoyed; the servants and horses have gone up to The Cottage, where they find an hospitable reception; and now the little party saunter dispersedly about the wood which surrounds The Cottage, sloping gently down to the sea. Lord Castleton and Miss Lisle have disappeared in company, and Lady Dorothea and Marjorie walk, one on each side of Mr. Crawford, along a broad path that skirts the wood, and is only separated from the sea by a low moss-grown wall and a narrow strip of shingly beach. The tide is in and the sparkling waves lap musically against the pebbly shore; the wind stirs through the firs and pine-trees that border the path and fill the air with their keen, odoriferous scent; cool shadows lie across the road, while the Firth beyond spreads its sunny, sparkling waters beneath the blue sky where far aloft fleecy white clouds are sailing. Away to the east tower the mountains of the Lake district in cloud-capped grandeur.

Presently Lady Dorothea breaks into artistic raptures over a fishing-boat with spreading sails of a warm, rich brown; and, finding a seat on a moss-grown fallen trunk, opens the sketch-book the gentleman has been carrying for her and falls to work with great earnestness, bidding her companions continue their walk.

Mr. Crawford is of a different type from that to which Marjorie's few male friends have hitherto belonged, and she is studying this new specimen with a species of diverted interest; while he, in blissful ignorance of the sentiment he inspires, believes he is making a conquest.

He is a little, pale, dissipated-looking man of about five-and-twenty, dressed with scrupulous care, and bearing himself with the air of one who is comfortably convinced of his own consequence in society. Wealthy and of good birth, he has been accustomed to deference from his earliest years; nor has the reputation of fastness, which he labors hard to maintain, done him the slightest harm in the set among which he chiefly mixes.

To-day he is in his best spirits, and is condescendingly making himself agreeable to the couple of very pretty, innocent little ladies who have been thrown on his hands—Lord Castleton having as yet devoted himself almost exclusively to Miss Lisle.

Lady Dorothea has been opening her innocent blue eyes very wide indeed as he has been regaling their unsophisticated ears with the gossip of the season, interspersed by pretty speeches such as he deems it necessary to address to every young lady to whom he desires to be civil; and even Marjorie, who has an instinctive taste for flirtation, has been tempted to put an end to his free-and-easy gallantry by administering a thorough snubbing. She refrains chiefly because she is piqued at Lord Castleton's inattention, partly because she is amused.

"You must go to town next season, Miss Bruce—positively you must; it is cruel to bury such attractions in a miserable country hole," Mr. Crawford observes *en passant*; and Marjorie, whose eyes chance at the moment to rest lovingly on the fair landscape lying seaward, recalls them and looks with demure impudence up into the speaker's languidly admiring eyes, fixed upon her fair face.

"The country loses its horrors when one grows accustomed to it—it is really quite endurable in spring-time, when you fashionables can only exist in London," she says, satirically; and he charitably credits her with sincerity in so speaking.

"Ah! yes," he says, giving a supercilious tug to his feeble, fair mustache; "I suppose one grows accustomed to all sorts of deprivations, and don't fret at them."

"The very eels get used to skinning, and rather like it than not," pursues Miss Maja, with growing impudence; but he remains comfortably ignorant of her presumptuous attempt at "chaffing" him, and laughs his feeble little laugh.

"Seriously, though, you must get introduced into London society," he resumes. "A girl like you, educated and accomplished and all that sort of thing, and with such a face and figure, could do marvels—if properly *chaperoned, et cetera*; and, judging by what I know of the Castleton family, I should say they would willingly give you a helping hand to enable you to make a really good marriage, which, I suppose, is a young lady's chief aim in life."

Marjorie colors, and laughs her mocking little laugh, which is not often forthcoming.

"You are extremely kind to take such a strong interest in my prospects, Mr. Crawford," she says, in her old tone; and, as she speaks, she takes a wild rose from her bosom and plucks it to pieces rather viciously.

He has culled this rose for her not half an hour ago—somewhat surprised at himself, too, for voluntarily taking so much trouble—and he looks with displeasure on its destruction.

"I wish I had let the rose stay on its native bush, since it has come to such a violent end!" he exclaims, with decidedly bad temper, as Marjorie shakes the last petal from her muslin dress, on which it has fallen.

"I wish with all my heart you had," she retorts; so sharply that her patronizing companion is quite startled, and perceives that he has not quite fathomed the rustic maiden he has been honoring by complimentary attentions. He discharges an arrow at random.

"A rose given you by Lord Castleton would have been differently treated, I dare say, Miss Bruce," he observes, jeeringly, an unpleasant smile crossing his face; and he looks at her with a stare to which she is by no means accustomed.

The arrow, chance as it is, goes straight home to Marjorie's heart. Safe in the secret drawer of her desk do not there lie half a dozen withered flowerets, possibly careless gifts of the young earl? She flushes crimson, and wheels quickly round.

"It is quite possible, Mr. Crawford. I have known Lord Castleton since I was a baby—he has been good enough to act like a brother to me all my life," she says, angrily, her very heat inclining her hearer to disbelieve her words. Then she adds, with a lame attempt at appearing unembarrassed, "I am rather tired—I shall go back to Lady Dorothea, and you can join us when you feel inclined."

Mr. Crawford does not relish the idea of being thus thrown on his own resources; besides, it occurs to him that this little country damsel may belong to that seldom-met-with class of womankind who, even in this age of progress, cherish old-fashioned notions at variance with the free-and-easy sentiments he had been uttering *a propos* of marriage-contracting.

He looks with a pathetic expression at Marjorie, and vouchsafes an apology in a lugubrious, coaxing tone, which strikes the volatile young lady as so exquisitely ridiculous, that she smiles and regains her good-humor.

The couple walk on again; and as Mr. Crawford is now more careful in his choice of subjects, and appears a shade less self-satisfied than before their little quarrel, Marjorie finds him more endurable.

By the time they rejoin Lady Dorothea they have apparently reached the flirting stage of acquaintanceship; but, in fact, Marjorie is only acting for the benefit of Lord Castleton, who is lazily reclining on the mossy turf at his sister's feet.

He raises himself on his elbow, and looks somewhat disapprovingly at them as they come forward; theoretically he objects to flirting, though in practice he is conscious of falling rather short.

"You appear to be enjoying yourselves, I am thankful to say," he remarks, as they come up, laughing sociably; and Marjorie detects the spice of insincerity in his words, and is highly gratified.

She smiles sweetly down at him, and gives a little nod of thanks for this expression of friendly feeling.

"I am glad to find you in such a proper frame of mind, Lord Castleton," she says gayly. "Gratitude for the enjoyment of others is a noble sentiment."

Mr. Crawford, bending over busy Lady Dorothea, and thereby bothering her dreadfully, raises his head and laughs in his feeble fashion. The earl has a sudden inward revelation of the exceeding beauty of gentleness and simplicity in woman.

He gets on his feet and yawns, rather bored, apparently.

"How exceedingly like the copybook lines of our school-days!" he retorts, in a languidly impudent way; and then they all laugh, though Marjorie does not see the need for laughter.

"Gratitude for the enjoyment of others is a noble sentiment," he repeats, in a slow, pompous, drawing tone; adding in a satirically amused way: "How long is it since you have taken to the highly edifying style of conversation, Miss Maja!"

"Miss Maja is angry and mortified, but she is too proud to betray her chagrin. She revenges herself in her own fashion, however."

Affecting not to hear his lordship's bantering inquiry, she turns to Mr. Crawford with her most winning smile and holds towards him a little bunch of blue violets she has culled in their woodland walk.

"Will you accept this from me?" she says, prettily uplifting smiling eyes to his while. "I am really sorry that the rose you gave me had such a short life, and I hope my violets may be less roughly treated."

Mr. Crawford takes the offering with gallant thanks, and looks exceedingly flattered—more so, indeed, than Marjorie is pleased to see.

She turns quickly away from him, and goes to Lady Dorothea.

"And what has become of Miss Lisle?" she asks, bending over her, and fixing her eyes on the almost completed sketch.

Lady Dorothea, absorbed in her work, is slow in answering, and Lord Castleton speaks for her.

"She has gone to pay a visit to an old woman who keeps the North Lodge—she was Miss Lisle's nurse once upon a time," he says; and in his reply there is a faint tone of exultation, which Marjorie considers highly ridiculous: she begins to entertain a dislike for a young lady so exemplary in her behavior that even her cousins glory in her doings.

"How good of her, Lord Castleton! What an example she sets before you, Lady Dorothea!" she says, scoffingly; but only Lord Castleton perceives the want of good faith in her speech.

Lady Dorothea lifts her head, and smiles in an absent way.

"I see that you are all very merry; but I have not been paying attention to your conversation, so I am at a loss, you know," she remarks, placidly looking round, on them all three with a kindly, innocent glance; then her sketch being finished, she rises and stretches herself.

Aware that it is quite time to stop quarreling, Lord Castleton seizes the sketch, and turns to Mr. Crawford and Marjorie for their opinion of it, and they are sufficiently well-bred to appear interested, and avail themselves of this opportunity of getting upon safe conversational ground. By-and-by they all go off through the wood to meet Miss Lisle, and, this meeting over, begin to prepare for departure.

They have a pleasant drive home, and reach Torwood House in good time for dinner.

Lady Castleton is a gracious if a somewhat silent hostess, and the dinner passes off well, the young people sustaining most of the conversation. Then follows a quiet musical hour in the drawing-room, during which Mr. Crawford and Marjorie manage to cultivate their newly sprung-up acquaintanceship. By the end of the evening they are quite intimate, and Marjorie is pleased to perceive that she has added another admirer to her list.

Mr. Crawford it is who, when the time for departure comes, cloaks her with tender care, thus securing a delightful opportunity of saying some tender parting words and arranging for a continuance of their acquaintanceship. Nor does he for a moment suspect that the smiling, gracious damsel is merely diverted by his evident inthrallment, and upon reaching home runs in to her father, comfortably musing over his after-supper tumbler of toddy, with a comical description of her new victim's exquisite airs and graces.

Mrs. Bruce has gone to bed; Mr. Bruce is jollily inclined, and there is no check on Marjorie's spirits. She seats herself on a footstool at her daddy's feet, and treats him to a gay recital of the day's doings, interspersed with many fond caresses. She accepts a glass of his toddy, though it is a beverage for which she has an unconquerable dislike, and lovingly drinks to his health as she puts it to her rosy lips; she bewitches him with her gayety and good humor, and makes him forget some serious misgivings as to the danger of her almost constant association with these fine folk around them—makes him at least resolve not to annoy her by a word of dissatisfaction.

Only once a sigh escapes him, and he says, with a fond glance down into her upturned face as she sits at his feet, her hand in his, "My little lass, you mind me o' our bonny brown filly—a gladsome, sprightly, unbroken young thing, wi' a' her troubles before her: I'm thinking ye've just as little notion o' what trouble lies before ye as the bit beastie has—eh, Maja?"

Maja laughs; but she sighs too, and answers him with a rebuking shake of her head.

"Poor couple of fillies! what a pity one can't be useless and gay all one's short life, daddy—it is so awfully nice! At least," she adds, with a beseeching air, "let me be like the filly, left in blissful ignorance of coming trials: I am only at grass yet; do let me gambol my fill. The breaking-in will be bad enough when it comes."

Mr. Bruce needs no further entreaty; but repenting of his *barbarity*, strives to vie with Maja in gayety, and so the evening ends merrily.

I must own that, but for Lord Castleton's ill-concealed disturbance of spirits, the welcome symptom of jealousy, Marjorie would not have concluded the day in such a pleasant flutter of excitement. Certainly, when she laid her head on her pillow, it was to dream of him, not of the master of Crawford Priory.

CHAPTER VII.

A WALK IN THE BEECH-TREE AVENUE.

SEVERAL weeks slipped by unmarked by any special event, yet not without influence on the after-life of my *dramatis personæ*. For Marjorie they were pleasant weeks—laughter-gladdened, deliciously idle, sunshiny weeks, in which she let herself drift passively with the current of pleasant enjoyment, utterly heedless of the ultimate bourne whither she was tending.

Half her time was spent at Torwood House, where the young people kept up a round of agreeable rural entertainments, in all of which she was free to participate. Having so long been Lady Dorothea's chief companion, this struck none of the Castleton family as an arrangement requiring immediate alteration, though there existed a vague understanding that this intimacy with Marjorie must eventually cease.

Meanwhile her fair face and merry ways helped wonderfully to lighten their daily life in the quiet country home, and she never missed a cordial welcome.

Certainly this carelessness about future consequences was not shared by the Bruces' less aristocratic neighbors, though as yet the object of their charitable concern had not chanced to become aware of it. Many were the wise saws quoted, with significant head-shakings, *a propos* of her doings, when social groups gathered round the tea-tables at which on festive occasions the farmers' wives were wont to entertain their friends—many the prognostications of coming trouble!

The servants' hall at Torwood House had, of course, its say on the matter; it was a whispered one, but it spread none the less rapidly on that account. No one as yet ventured to charge either of the offenders whose doing were thus investigated—Lord Castleton and Marjorie Bruce—with a greater iniquity than that of carrying on a foolish flirtation; but it needed no sage to discover that, out of this seedling of gossip, time and cultivation might raise a very flourishing scandal.

The real state of the case I must tell you in a few words. Humanity is not ordinarily very wise at twenty-four and eighteen, which were the respective years of this pair of culprits; and the very agreeable and enlivening flirtation with which they had inaugurated their renewal of long-interrupted intercourse had now reached that interesting stage in which, unless the players are exceptionally fearless, such graceful comedies are apt to be spoiled by a totally incongruous admixture of the tragic element.

An unstudied word or two, a passionate vibration of voice, a momentary weariness, of one's proper *role* and bold plunge into rash improvisation, and the laughter is over. The curtain may fall to rise on a scene of a widely different character.

Our young couple, meanwhile, were happily unconscious of any special cause for anxiety. Lord Castleton found Marjorie Bruce a wonderfully charming little witch, in whose company a man might find abundance of harmless enjoyment. Marjorie guessed this, and was flattered by his approbation, and inclined to give away her girlish, sentimental heart, if his handsome young lordship would but stretch out a pleading hand for it. She was too proud to fall in love with any man of whose serious inthrallment she was not sure.

One pair of eyes watched with no little pain the proceedings of the unthinking pair—Miss Lisle's.

Until quite convinced that for both their sakes it was necessary to open Lord Castleton's eyes to the danger of his forgetting what was due to herself as his engaged wife, she remained a silent spectator. When she felt sure of her ground, she took a dignified step, which cost her no little suffering.

Never was man more taken by surprise than was the earl when she, the most unexacting of girls, who had never in her life interfered with any of his doings or brought forward any special claim upon his regard and cousinly affection, sought him in the smoking-room one fine morning, and expressed a wish to have a confidential talk over matters of importance to them both.

His cigar was flung away, and he was out of his lounging-chair in a moment, for he knew his cousin's ways too well to suppose that she had come to him in his special *sanctum* to discuss any trivialities.

"To be sure, Nessie; only this room is not fit for you to sit down in, it smells so horribly of smoke," he says, quickly, fixing a somewhat deprecating look on her.

She is even paler than is her wont; her eyes are not free from signs of recent tears, her lips are compressed; it is impossible to avoid seeing that she has been disturbed by some mental suffering.

Yet she smiles and returns his look with one of perfect sweetness, for she cannot bear that he should be causelessly perturbed.

"I have nothing to say that will be unpleasant for you to hear, Cousin Herbert," she says, laying her hand in his, outstretched to take it.

"Won't you come out with me?" she adds. "My visit is drawing near its close. Let us have one more saunter in the beech-tree avenue; we have had many a pleasant chat there, have we not, Herbert?"

There is a touching little tremor in her voice which goes straight to his heart—a very impressionable, if a somewhat unstable one.

He has a faint presentiment of what she is about to say; and his better nature asserts itself at once, aroused by his perception of her true nobility of soul.

"And we shall have many more there and elsewhere, God grant, Nessie," he says, with unusual fervor, pressing her hand and looking hard at her in a way which says more than his words.

She loved him with all her heart—she lived on his often careless, kind words and looks; and now, moved by his unfeigned heartiness of affection for her, she has difficulty in keeping back a rush of tears.

Her five-and-twenty years of highly civilized existence have, however, taught her a tolerable command of her emotions. She merely smiles again, and says, with a scarcely perceptible increase of tremor in her voice, "Come, then, Herbert; it seems wrong to stay indoors on such a lovely morning."

They go down stairs together without exchanging another word, and, passing through the hall-door, reach the appointed place of confidence in a very few minutes.

It is a long, stately avenue of beech-trees, planted by an almost forgotten ancestor of the present earl's. September winds have already done havoc among the thick clustering leaves which in summer form its fair green roof; many of them now lie strewn over the smooth greenward underfoot, and the clear autumn sunshine pours through the partly stripped branches overhead and casts checkered radiance upon the path. A soft breeze is stirring in the gloriously tinted beech-trees and chasing fleecy white clouds over the azure of the sky. The air is clear and bracing. Lord Castleton's spirits rise, now that he is in the bright sunny outer world, and he seeks to regain his usual light-heartedness.

"I have a presentiment that you are going to scold me, Nessie," he says, stopping and laying a coaxing

hand on her arm, after they have walked on in silence side by side during a few minutes, and he smiles at her in his most coaxing way.

"Don't, there's a dear, good little coz," he adds. "I know I'm a sad, thoughtless, selfish, good-for-nothing sort of a fellow, but upon my honor I'm going to turn over a new leaf. Don't speak any more of going away, Nessie, and you shall see the blessed change for yourself; give me another chance before you say what you are thinking of saying."

Miss Lisle smiles, but somewhat sadly, and the firmness of her look remains unaltered.

"I am not going to scold you, Cousin Herbert," she answers, looking steadily up at him; "and I don't think you guess rightly what I wish to say."

A not unpleasant notion that she is simply jealous, and that a few coaxing words will put matters right, is crushed by this gently spoken yet firm rejoinder; and he is silent, perceiving that his first impression was the more correct.

They move on a few paces; then Miss Lisle, summoning all her resolution, proceeds to the task she has set herself.

"Herbert," she says, suddenly slipping her hand within his arm and looking up into his face with a steady, tender gravity of expression, "will you be perfectly in earnest for a little while? Will you let me speak to you out of my very heart, and answer me out of yours? only for this once. I beg it of you as a mark of your friendship for me."

Perceiving her to be hopelessly serious, he hastens to give the required promise, speaking very gently, and caressingly stroking the little white hand that lightly lies on his strong arm. He is really fond of her, in a serene, lazy, fashion, and his conscience rebukes him for having so long delayed an explicit expression of his wish to make her his wife. He forms a sudden magnanimous resolution to speak out now, and quiet that evidently troubled, loving heart, which he has long believed entirely his own. Spite of that imprudent but pleasant flirtation with Marjorie, he had never for a moment seriously contemplated breaking off the semi-engagement to his cousin or contracting a marriage with any girl, however fascinating, out of his own social sphere; nor did he think he had in any way transgressed the legitimate bounds of a sentimental flirtation.

Ere he has found words fit to communicate a veritable proposal, his companion speaks again, the same grave tenderness in her look and voice.

"We have always been good friends, you and I Herbert, have we not?" she says; then, in the same breath, continues, without waiting for his ready assent, "Only I have often thought that we might have been better friends still but for the scheming of our relatives with regard to our worldly interests. I feel sure that you would have trusted me more and liked me better, if long ago you had rid yourself of the most mistaken notion that you were bound in honor to make me your wife."

Lord Castleton takes advantage of a momentary pause in her somewhat tremulously spoken assertion to interpose a vehement negative.

"I could not possibly esteem or trust you more than I do, Nessie," he says, warmly; "nor love you more dearly," he adds, kindly, fearing that she may find this assurance not quite satisfactory.

They have stopped their walk ere this, and stand quite still, looking earnestly into each other's faces. When her cousin makes his gallant speech, Miss Lisle only shakes her head, and, without pausing to criticize it, goes on in a hurried, a litated tone:

"I have come to you this morning to ask you to join me in breaking off our foolish, embarrassing half-engagement. I want you to agree to our being simply cousins and friends for the rest of our lives."

Lord Castleton feels rather annoyed at this statement; it hurts his vanity to find that it is possible for her thus to give him up.

He frowns and keeps silence, fixing his eyes moodily upon the ground, and giving a series of impatient tugs to his mustache. She sees that he is displeased, yet proceeds unflinchingly, for a sense of duty upholds her:

"You have always been very kind and good to me, Herbert, but you know very well that you have never loved me as you ought to love the woman whom you mean to make your wife. That was not your fault nor yet mine, only it makes you and me unfit to make each other happy in married life; and it is our duty to consider, without further procrastination, how best to make an end of all this family scheming, and let the world understand that you are at last free to follow the bidding of your own judgment and inclination in choosing a wife."

Miss Lisle has in her last sentence betrayed herself utterly, and her cousin seizes the opportunity of attack with unwonted eagerness.

"And why me, Ernestine? If the chains we have been bound in are so intolerably galling, surely you are as much to be pitied as I am. You speak as if I was the only victim."

As he says this he looks hard at her, frowning, with courteous intention of hiding a scarcely repressible gleam of fun which twinkles in his blue eyes. He has the satisfaction of perceiving her to be momentarily confused; her color comes with a rush and her eyes fall before his, nor does she find words to answer him on the instant.

There is a little pause, during which Lord Castleton employs himself in studying his cousin's looks and thinking of her many virtues—or once, at least, succeeding in forgetting her ten thousand pounds a year.

The sunlight is always trying to her little, dark-complexioned face, and she happens to be standing where it falls upon it. It troubles him to be forced to own her plain, undeniably plain; but he is comforted again by the discovery that even in this honest broad daylight her *tout ensemble* is pleasing; in her *daintily*

simple morning-dress she looks a sweet, high-bred little lady, whose pure heart a man might well be proud to win.

A very few moments pass thus; then Miss Lisle lifts up her eyes and says, with a smile which has more of sadness than mirth in it, "I am determined to be honest with you, Cousin Herbert—perfectly honest—no matter how odd you may think me. I spoke of your freedom because it is chiefly of importance to you to be free. I will never marry."

Lord Castleton looks thoroughly serious now, impressed by the brave honesty of her confession, and a sharp pang of self-reproach pierces his careless, kind heart.

"You must like me a little bit, then, Nessie, though you think me such a changeable, ungrateful wretch?" he says, very tenderly, looking at her. He repents his question the moment it is uttered, for it has the most unexpected effect of setting his cousin's lip quivering pitifully and filling her eyes with tears. Keenly ashamed of this sudden failure of the gently dignified self-command she has hitherto preserved all through this trying interview, she turns quickly away from him, and with rare impatience exclaims:

"Leave me to myself a little, Herbert. You are ungenerous and unkind to question me so."

And so, after all her heroism—upon which perhaps she has prided herself more than was quite right—this fit of womanish weakness overcomes her in the very presence of the man whom she has brought there to listen to her wise counsels and warnings, and to impress by the dignified composure of her farewell.

Thus sharply she takes herself to task while dashing the hated tears out of her eyes with a trembling hand, and making a mighty effort to control those rebellious muscles about her mouth; but it is all in vain. She can only cry noiselessly in a fashion that is cruelly agonizing to herself—can only determinedly avert her face, in spite of Lord Castleton's really distressed entreaties that she would let him speak to her.

He lets her alone for a little while at first, feeling bound to obey her imperative request; but, utterly unused as he is to see her overcome in this way, he before long is at her side again, whispering kind, coaxing words, by no means the sort most calculated to compose her in her present state of mind. Her disposition is too sweet to admit of long indulgence of ill-humor, and presently she yields, turning round a tear-stained face to him and forcing a shadow of a smile.

"I am as determined as ever that you and I shall only be *cousins*, remember, Herbert," she says, by way of protest, as he takes her hand and slips it within his arm. He smiles, and looks provokingly handsome and triumphant.

"Let us continue our walk, Nessie," he says, with good-humored peremptoriness. "You have had your say—now I mean to have mine." And then they walk on in silence, which he is the first to break.

"Nessie," he exclaims, abruptly, in a voice which is not like his own, it is so earnest and full of deep feeling, "can you not understand how a man may be bewitched for a little while by a pretty face without ever really being at the bottom of his heart unfaithful to the aspirations of his better self? how a man may, out of sheer thoughtlessness, say and do all sorts of follies while he is under this spell of the senses, and be thoroughly disgusted with himself when he awakes? Yet how should you understand!" he adds immediately—"a good, pure-souled little thing like you, whose impulses seem never to lead you into greater faults than an over-generosity and self-forgetfulness?"

Miss Lisle raises her downcast eyes with a look that is half protest and half gratification; but she does not say a word, and he runs on in the same eager way: "Do you think it is possible for a man who has for years hoped to call a good, noble-minded woman his wife, suddenly to abandon that hope, though he feels himself as unworthy of her as she can conceive him to be? Do you really think so, Nessie?"

There is no withstanding his pleading tone and glance, and Miss Lisle uplifts a pair of very loving, dark eyes, once more swimming in tears, and says, with a sigh that expresses perfect content:

"Ah, Herbert? if you are satisfied, everything is right: only I fancied that you would be happier quite free."

And then he stoops down and kisses her, and, with an abrupt return to his every-day manner, says, with provoking assurance, "We made a solemn vow to be honest with each other, did not we, Cousin Ernestine?"

She laughs, but looks a little embarrassed, feeling how ridiculously soon she has succumbed to his persuasive powers.

"You acknowledge it, Nessie, my dear," he proceeds, flashing a mischievous glance down at her. "Well, then, I must tell you that I am not quite pleased with your conduct this morning: you have spoiled my morning smoke; you have sent a score of daggers into my poor heart, and altogether used me very cruelly. Is not this true?"

She only shakes her head and looks shyly down, but, nothing daunted by her silence, he goes on in the same strain:

"And the reason of all this shocking tyranny—dare I proclaim it, Nessie?"

"No, Herbert, don't; you will make me really angry if you tease me so," the girl says, laughing, and laying a timid little hand on his mouth as he bends his head down to catch her reply.

He caressingly presses his lips to the soft, tiny hand, and with a growing light of fun and daring in his eyes, says, in a half-whisper, drawing her close to him and gazing into her face, "Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Ashkelon! Cousin Nessie was jealous, and without the least real cause."

"You are an incorrigible—I give you up as hopeless, Herbert," is all the rebuke she had the power to utter; and thus he leaves the field with flying colors, after all,

the luncheon-bell just then summoning them to the house.

As they go in he whispers one little speech, which makes amends for all his previous levity.

"You must give yourself to me very soon, Nessie; I need you badly to help me to be good and true. I promise to try and grow worthy of such a noble little wife, and you must not keep me long waiting."

And so, at last, the date of their marriage is taken into consideration, and in a very short time the neighborhood is aware of their engagement having become a recognized fact, and expectant of that agreeable cause of pleasant stir—a fashionable wedding.

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD BELL AND HER BAIRN.

THE daylight is almost gone. A cold north wind is moaning eerily amidst the branches of the high old trees that border the road, and is driving dark, threatening clouds across the sky. Rain has been falling in heavy showers, and the stubble-fields which lie on either hand have a dreary, sodden look, such as they seldom wear until late autumn. The whole world seems to Marjorie's eyes to have become suddenly gloomy and despairing as she glances round her while pursuing her homeward way.

She has been up at Torwood House, where she has heard the news of Lord Castleton's matrimonial intentions. She has smiled up into his face and spoken her congratulations quite prettily, has listened with polite interest to Lady Dorothea's details of the lover-like behavior of the affianced cousins, and made the remarks expected of her without one stammer; has caught a look of unmistakable compassion in Miss Lisle's eyes, yet has behaved towards her with all the courteous deference she has been wont to show to the ladies of Torwood House (her special chum, Lady Dorothea, excepted); and now she is hurrying home, hot tears of mingled shame and anger in her eyes, and the sharpest pain she has ever known in her happy young life piercing her warm, proud little heart.

For not with impunity had she forsaken the safe, sweet pleasures that lay within her proper sphere to run with gay restlessness after distracting excitement not to be found there. Her vanity, her ambition, her appreciation of the luxuries of fashionable life had grown marvelously during the last few months, and this proposed marriage would have been a blow even if she had not conceived a liking for the fascinating young earl.

She had been scheming, although scarcely consciously, as many vain girls of her age are tempted to do; and now, in her disappointment, her eyes were suddenly opened to the meanness of which she had been guilty, and her better self rose up in judgment against her.

She had behaved very badly, and she had done her utmost to get Lord Castleton to behave in the same way; and she had done this without even the excuse of loving him; for she only wanted to be his wife that she might be a countess—she was sure of that.

Her father was infinitely dearer than any man alive, so it could not be that she was in love. She was only mortified and disappointed in ambitious hopes, and well deserved to be so.

How dreadful it would be, if Lord Castleton or anybody else had discovered her unworthy thoughts! The very idea made her face burn with shame-stricken blushes.

How thankful she was that at least she had the grace to hide her mortification, and so could hold up her head among them all if once she were free from this overwhelming load of self-contempt.

She must be penitent, and good, and generous now, and think chiefly of doing what was right, and surely by-and-by she would regain her old happiness and forget all this pain.

To begin with, she would think kindly of Lord Castleton and Miss Lisle, and wish them happiness in their married life; and so resolving, she quiets herself, and by the time she pushes open the gate admitting to her home there is a new light of gentle serenity on her bonny, tear-stained face.

Finding nobody in the parlor, she goes to the kitchen, after vainly looking for her parents up and down the house.

Here there is only an old woman, a faithful servant, who has lived at the farm for the last thirty years, and is quite as much at home as any of the family.

She has been ironing, and is now busy arranging a pile of snowy linen spread over a table in front of the wide hearth, where a mighty fire is burning, filling the big, bare, scrupulously clean apartment with dancing fire-light.

As the girl enters, she lifts her head, covered with a many-frilled snowy mutch, and looks at her rather crossly.

"Guid save us! Miss Marjorie, what's brocht ye hame sae sune, an' the maister awa' down to the Downs to see auld Maister Alton, an' the mistress aff to see auld Kirsty Dalziel, that's ta'en bad again wi' her rheumatism, an' sent for her, silly bodie, as if she was a quack doctor, to rin at a body's beck. But wha can wonder at it, when the mistress gie's awa' sae mony gude things as she does to every greedy auld body that makes a puir face to her!"

Marjorie knows the speaker too well to heed her seeming bad humor. She comes up to her chair and stands by her side with a rather down-cast air, giving no immediate explanation of her unlooked-for appearance, and presently the rugged old face softens into an expression of kindly concern.

"Bless ye, bairn, what ails ye? Has onybody been vexin' ye up at the big house? My certes, they had na better!" she says, with sudden ire, which brings a smile to the girl's face, and draws an answer at last.

"Nobody, Bell; only I am tired. I didn't want to stay to dinner there, for my head ached a little, and

battling with the wind on my road home has made it worse. Never mind me; make somebody get me a cup of tea, Bell, that's all I need."

Bell gives a contemptuous grunt, and, moving to the fire, puts on a shining kettle.

"That's easier said than done, Miss Marjorie; the lasses are baith oot gallivantin' wi' their lads, silly limmers; but I'll get ye your tea as comfortable as your braw table-maid could. Gang ben to the parlor an' rest ye a bit, bairn, and I'll bring ye your tea directly," she adds with a kindly glance.

But Maja, who has dropped into the vacated arm-chair, and is staring into the fire in an absent way, declines to move.

"Let me stay beside you, Bell; I won't bother you," she says, fixing a pair of grave, wistful eyes on the familiar homely old face which looks down at her; and Bell perceives that there is something amiss, and grows suddenly tender, for in truth the girl is very dear to her.

"Deed you look tired oot, hinny. Let Bell help ye, as she used to dae when ye were a bonny wee bairnie. Hech, hech, it seems like yesterday ye were tottin' about the hoose lauchin and jabberin as I never heard a human wean, an' noo ye sit there a fine weel-grown young leddy, wi' a kinds o' accomplishments at your finger ends, an' a head fu' o' outlandish learnin'. Ay, ay, ower fu' to haud muckle common-sense and prudence maybe, puir bairn."

As the old woman speaks she relieves Marjorie of her hat and wrappings, and passes a fondling hand over the somewhat dark disordered hair, smoothing it into tolerable tidiness; then, getting no response but a rather tired smile, she trots up stairs to the girl's bedroom and returns with her tiny silver-buckled slippers.

"Let Bell see if your feet are wet, dearie," she says, in her pathetic, rough voice, and Maja is childish enough to be wonderfully comforted by all this petting. It does her good to sit quite silent in the bright, quiet, homely kitchen, watching with languid interest old Bell's deft movements as she prepares a dainty tea-tray.

By the time tea is ready, she is rested and ready for a chat; and, Bell being like-minded, the two go into a series of reminiscences of her childish days, more interesting to themselves than I fear they would prove to my readers.

When the girl has drunk her tea, she lets Bell leave her, and settles herself in her father's high-backed old easy-chair by the parlor fire, once more relapsing into a musing fit.

Her own shortcomings and the excellences of her friends are rarely indeed the subjects of her meditations, but to-night she dwells upon them with a strange persistence; and so it is that when, in the course of half an hour, Bell throws open the door and announces Mr. John Alton, he finds her in one of her rare moods of gentle humility.

CHAPTER IX.

MARJORIE IS COMFORTED.

MARJORIE looks startled, but greets her visitor with her friendliest smile. He has been a pretty constant visitor ever since their first meeting several months ago, so the two are quite old friends by this time.

It has as yet pleased the young lady to be blind to what everyone else has long ago discovered—his growing love for her. When a glimmer of the truth has forced itself upon her, she has wilfully shut her eyes, shrinking from facing the possible consequences of this attachment.

Of course Marjorie has managed to make out a case for herself; it suffices at least to quiet her own conscience, which at this period of her life is not a very troublesome power.

He has never spoken out in unmistakable language, has never assumed an unmistakably lover-like manner, and meanwhile it is very pleasant to have his society when no more exhilarating recreation is to be found; and she smiles upon him with an innocent, frankly shown good-will, which neither he nor the lookers-on at the little drama know how rightly to interpret.

The young man is a favorite with Mr. and Mrs. Bruce, who lose no opportunity of showing their liking for him, so there is little wonder that he finds their home a very attractive spot, and resorts to it often enough to excite the notice of the gossiping country neighborhood. He does not lack officious warnings as to the danger of thus exposing himself to Miss Bruce's reprehensible coquettish arts, for, alas! the little lady is too pretty and fearless and aristocratic in her tastes to be without enemies of her own sex and station in life; but these friendly counsels have an effect quite opposite to that which they are intended to produce, merely arousing a generous indignation at the uncharitable propensities of his counselors, and a resolution to be very tolerant in his judgment of a girl so young and untaught by life's harsher experiences.

So the two young people meet to-night with the familiarity of manner consequent upon frequent intercourse. Sociable Marjorie is glad to have her unwanted solitude broken in upon, and he is glad to find her alone and apparently pleased to see him.

She notices that his clothes are drenched, and that rain-drops are dripping from the hat he has just taken off; and, hearing that he has alighted from a ten-mile ride in the rain, expresses kind concern, and hastens to help him off with his great-coat.

He laughs, and looks surprised at her concern.

"Why, Miss Marjorie," he says, motioning her away with good-humored imperiousness, "I am quite as accustomed to rain as to sunshine. I like it, and thrive on a drenching like a Newfoundland dog."

As he speaks, he throws off his rough blue great-coat, and gives his damp hair a quick shake out, much as a wet Newfoundland dog might, looking the while as

manly a specimen of the stronger sex as woman's eyes need wish to look upon.

"Excuse me presenting myself in this plight. I tried to pass your gate, but temptation overcame me," he says; adding, with sudden gravity, "you won't catch cold from me bringing this dampness in here, will you, Miss Bruce?"

He speaks in perfect good faith, and accompanies his words with a somewhat troubled glance which diverts her in turn.

"I am willing to run all risks, if you will sit down and let me get you something to eat or drink," she answers, with a bright upward look into his eyes, and a comical elevation of her eyebrows.

He perceives that she is amused by the contrast between his notions of what is safe for her and what is safe for him, and laughs, coloring slightly, as he gives up his hat and coat at her imperative bidding.

She runs away with them to the kitchen, where Bell undertakes to get them dried, and he has a moment's leisure to think how well such lowly, kindly occupation becomes her—how sweet a woman she can be when it pleases her.

When she returns she is followed by Bell bearing a tray with such refreshments as the two women think likely to be acceptable, and he is compelled to eat and drink in spite of a laughing remonstrance.

John Alton finds the little parlor a wonderfully pleasant spot, and his dark face wears its brightest look as he turns to his companion, who, having sent away old Bell, is busying herself in kindly ministry to his wants.

A lamp burns dimly on the table; but the room is chiefly lighted up by dancing fire-light, which is excessively becoming to the slim girlish figure in its soft dark-green draperies. How fair she is! how graceful in her every motion! how innocent are the glances she bestows upon him as she proffers her hospitable attentions! He is conscious of a vague shadow of sadness in her air which to-night invests her with a new, rare charm.

Seldom has he seen her so charming; and he falls more hopelessly in love each time their eyes meet, though, with true Scotch undemonstrativeness, he hides his feelings to the best of his ability.

Yet Marjorie cannot mistake the tenderness in his voice as he says, presently:

"You do not look quite yourself to-night. Are you tired, Miss Bruce?"

His kind, dark eyes are on her face as she sits opposite to him, leaning her bonny young head somewhat pensively upon her clasped hands, her elbows planted on the table.

Somehow the question overcomes her, her color comes, and her eyes fill with the easy, quickly forgotten tears of girlhood.

"I am quite well, thank you, only my head aches badly," is her contradictory reply, rather unsteadily spoken. Then she rises and moves over to the fire, turning her back upon him that she may hide her foolish tears.

John Alton has never before seen her bright eyes dimmed, and he is mightily concerned.

He gives her a few minutes to recover herself; then, rising, follows her to the fireplace in a hesitating way which is very unlike him.

Marjorie wheels round at his approach and smiles in apologetic fashion, looking very sweet as she upturns her still wet eyes to his.

"What a baby I am! I am heartily ashamed of myself, Mr. Alton!" she says, rather tremulously, in spite of her smile; and he perceives that her breath comes quickly, and that her chest heaves with suppressed sobs.

He recovers his wonted self-possession, and comes to her aid with that kind peremptoriness of his which has soothed many a troubled heart ere now.

"Miss Bruce," he says, laying a kind, determined hand upon her arm, "you have worn yourself out somehow or other; now you must rest. You have been very good to me many a time; now I am going to be good to you just for this once, and because you happen to have no dearer friend at hand; you must lie down and rest for a long time, and resolutely banish every anxious thought until you feel better.

"Will you go to bed, or will you rest here?" he adds, indicating by a glance that here means in her father's high-backed, tempting old easy-chair drawn close to the blazing fire.

Marjorie is, in truth, so tired—tired body and mind—that it is a blessed relief to be thus taken charge of, yet she makes a faint protest.

"A good hearty scolding is all that I need," she answers, trying to laugh, but failing utterly; "still, for peace's sake, I'll agree to rest in the easy chair."

Mr. Alton smiles and nods acquiescence, then he brings a foot-stool to the easy-chair, and makes the girl lie back in pleasant, sorely needed restfulness.

"Your hands are quite cold, let me chafe them a little; you have often been very good to me, you know," he says, with his tender smile, coloring a little as he speaks; and she lifts a pair of tired, sad eyes to his true, manly face, and gives him a cold little hand quite willingly, feeling for the time, in the utter absence of coquetry which her present languor causes, that it is a comfort to have a strong brother-like friend by to take care of her.

Gently, with few words, and these few such as any nurse might have spoken, the young man chafes the chill hands outstretched to him; then he brings a cosy bright-colored sofa-blanket and covers the girl up with it. Nor does she make any resistance, so welcome is this quiet, soothing tendence in her depressed state.

"I came here to-night that I might talk to you about some affairs of my own—of importance to me," John Alton says, after he has settled her comfortably; "but I have changed my mind. Will you let me come back to-morrow forenoon and give me an hour alone with you then?"

She lifts her downcast eyes and looks at him in a troubled, self-reproachful way, at last believing that he loves her and means to seek her as his wife; but the steadiness with which he goes on reassures her.

"I have nothing to say specially interesting to you, I dare say, Miss Bruce; only I want your opinion about some private perplexities of mine."

John Alton is in mighty earnest, she perceives, and she looks at him in unfeigned astonishment.

"My opinion, Mr. Alton!" she says, amazedly, raising herself from her reclining posture; "nobody ever asked me for my opinion on anything of the least consequence. How on earth did you fix upon me as adviser?"

He answers unfalteringly, looking her steadily in the face, though his dark face flushes.

"You are my friend," he says, slowly; "you are a woman, and women, I take it, are nicer in their notions of rectitude than we poor world-hardened men. I want to show you two paths that lie open to me, and to ask you which I ought to choose. I know you will judge rightly if you let your pure conscience speak."

How often does sincere praise stab like a dagger! Marjorie shrinks back now in keen shame and self-reproach, unable to utter a word. This day her unthinking, merry, irresponsible girlhood seems ended, and a weight of womanly cares and duties falling on her weak shoulders.

"If you cannot advise me, you can at least listen to my case, Miss Bruce. You will do so much, won't you?" the young man goes on, taking her hand, and leaning over her with that droll combination of resolution and gentleness in his look which generally enabled him to carry his point.

"Yes, of course, I'll do so much, Mr. Alton," the girl answers, smiling in a very winning way; and then he puts her footstool right for her, and says "Good-night," rather abruptly.

"Au revoir! not good-bye," she says, kindly following him with grave, wistful eyes as, having said a final good-bye, he moved to the door, and, looking round, he repeats her words with a radiant glance.

Marjorie hears him and old Bell engage in a short colloquy, as he puts on his great-coat in the little hall; then he goes off to the stables to get his horse and directly after she hears the clatter of its hoofs as he rides briskly away.

She believes herself a good deal in love with somebody else, and consequently feels annoyed that the clatter of these departing hoofs pains her; yet should Lord Castleton persevere in his lately adopted prudential course, her warm little heart will not long hold out against the second besieger, I do not hesitate to assert.

While Marjorie is wondering over his strange desire of communicating his mysterious perplexities to her, of all the unlikely advisers in the wide world, and making up her mind that he must certainly be very much in love with her after all, old Bell comes in to remove the tray and express her approval of this suitor for her young mistress's favor.

"Eh, Miss Maja," she says, with emphasis, as she brushes up the hearth and puts on fresh coals, "I wonder whaur your een are that ye dinna see the folly o' takin' in wi' idle deceivin' fine gentlemen that have na a thocht o' marriage in their heids, an' a braw-made, weel-learned gentleman-farmer like yon watchin' for a nod o' encouragement frae ye. Yon's a man to be proud o'; gude looks, gude heart, gude heid, an' the bonniest place about the kintra side. I dinna ken what ye would hae mair."

Marjorie sits up and confronts Bell with a very angry look.

"You must never speak so to me again, Bell; you have no right to do it, and I will not bear it," she says, in a voice that trembles, and her face crimsoned with suppressed indignation.

Bell has no great dread of the girl's tantrums, as she calls her; fits of displeasure, and her own temper fails her shamefully. The restrained suspicions of months at last find some expression, so provoked is she by what she considers a perfectly unwarrantable attack.

"I've carried ye in my arms when ye were an innocent bairn, Miss Bruce," she says, hotly; "an' I'll not stand by an' see ye choose the downward road noo without gien' ye a word o' warnin'. The maister and mistress are blind an' deaf to what a body else can see plain enough, an' I have na had the heart to say a word to them yet; but mark my sayin', your fine gentleman maun gang, or your fair fame maun gang suner or later."

As she spoke, with gradually raised voice, the girl sprung up and stood trembling in helpless wrath. What could she say in retort sharp enough to silence further insulting warnings?

Then she felt ashamed of venting her passion on such a humble old head as Bell's, and with a struggle checked the violent words that rose to her lips.

"Bell," she says, not without dignity, "I have a right to know fully what you mean. Have people outside this house spoken slanderingly of me, or are these wicked notions your own? I insist upon knowing; and if I can't find out, my father must hear all this and act as he thinks right."

Marjorie turned very white as she spoke, and poor old Bell's heart smote her. She rose up from her coal-stubble by which she had been kneeling, and took a step or two towards her offended young mistress, then sunk down in a chair and burst out sobbing.

"Dinna tak what I've said to heart, Miss Bruce; but 'deed folk have been claverin' about ye, and I've been burning to warn ye for twa or three days gone by. I could bite out my tongue noo I've got my will."

Such is the explanation she gives, and Marjorie is more troubled than before. Determining to say no more at present, she is leaving the room, when Bell calls after her, coming forward as she does so with eager yet timid intreaty in her look.

"Ae word mair, an' then I've dune, Miss Bruce; ye

canna be angrier wi' auld Bell than ye are the noo. Dinna tak the worth o' a saxpence frae yon flatterin' tongued godless laird o' Crawford Priory; dinna let him come dangling here after ye ony mair. I ken mair about his doings than I can tell ye, hinny; he's no fit to breathe the same air ye breathe, my innocent bairn."

Bell laid a trembling hand on the girl's sleeve and clutched it firmly, so that escape was out of her power.

For some time Marjorie had been pestered by Mr. Crawford's too obtrusive attentions, and a vague dislike and distrust of him have been growing up within her. She does not resent this speech, much to Bell's relief.

"Dinna tak that lap-dog he wants to gie ye, Miss Bruce," she goes on, with another eager pull at Marjorie's sleeve; and a faint smile dawns on the girlish face, unused to being long serious.

This lapdog is a costly toy-terrier which Mr. Crawford has been pressing her to accept.

Only the other day he has attempted to leave it at the farm-house in Marjorie's absence, and has been routed by Bell, greatly to his disgust; the description of the encounter, as given by the conqueror, has amused her vastly, and a remembrance of it suffices to banish the last vestige of displeasure.

"Bell," she says, with a sudden return to her wonted good-humor, "you can hang him and his lapdog to-morrow mornin': if you like, and I'll never shed a tear for either of them. I never meant to take the dog or any other gift from him, by-the-way," she adds, shaking her head at the old woman in a not unkindly fashion.

Bell heaves a sigh of relief, and lets go her sleeve at last. As Marjorie is leaving the room, she turns round and vouchsafes a still more welcome bit of news by way of setting the faithful, if over-zealous, old woman quite at ease.

"Lord Castleton's marriage with Miss Lisle is going to come off before very long, Bell, so another of your bugbears should disappear."

The girl laughs and blushes as she speaks, then disappears through the open door-way, while Bell stands staring at her.

The poor old body is puzzled by her quick changes of mood, and shakes her head in a perplexed way many times that night as she thinks over their quarrel, but it is long before she again ventures to take her to task for her misdemeanors.

Bell's warning made more impression on Marjorie than one would have thought likely, and the damsel went to sleep with a fixed resolution to be much more careful of her own dignity than she had of late been. She was too proud and fond of approbation to be unmoved by the danger of having her often thoughtless doings ill-naturedly gossiped over.

CHAPTER X.

A PAINFUL RENCONTRE.

"AND how is my little lass's headache this morning? It's fair out o' her line to have headaches isn't it?" was Mr. Bruce's morning greeting, as Marjorie came down to breakfast.

The storm was over, soft autumn sunshine streamed into the little parlor, two kind familiar faces turned towards her with ready welcome as she made her entry; the coffee and toast seemed to smell even more sweetly than usual since she was feeling the effect of yesterday's fasting. She could not for the life of her be fittingly unhappy, and wisely succumbed to the force of circumstances.

"Good-morning, mammy; good-morning, old man: I'm awfully hungry," she said, going up to her father and mother and kissing them; then settling herself in her special seat at her father's right hand, she began her breakfast with no further loss of time.

The farmer beamed diverted approval upon her, and plied his own knife and fork with increased appreciation of the good things of his lot—his well-spread board, his peaceful, cheery home—his sensible, comely wife and winsome little lass—and Mrs. Bruce in her staid way was specially kind and agreeable.

Old Bell had given them the news of the young earl's proposed marriage when they came home the night before (Marjorie having gone to bed ere their return), and they had both fancied their daughter's unwonted gleam of indignation was but an excuse for seeking the privacy of her own room, there to indulge a fit of girlish vexation.

They both believed her inclined to fall in love with the handsome young nobleman; and, feeling sure that, in spite of his evident admiration, he would never dream of marrying her, were thankful to find that he had taken a step so certain to open her eyes to the unmeaningness of his flattering attentions. That Marjorie should accept this state of matters so philosophically as she appeared to be doing, was a new source of satisfaction. In the course of breakfast they found an acceptable explanation of this phenomenon in her admission of her growing liking for her visitor of the previous evening.

"Do you know, daddy, I almost think I'd have fallen in love with him long ago, if mamma and you had not kept praising him so," she said by-and-by, in her saucy way, accompanying her words with a demurely mischievous glance into both their faces; and it diverted her greatly to see the guilty look which this unexpected sally produced.

"You're a saucy little baggage, and have far too high an opinion of yourself, Miss Madge," laughed her father, coming behind her chair and taking her bonny arch face between his hands as she leaned back to look up at him.

"No wonder, father, considering how you and the Torwood grandees have spoiled her!" said her mother, with a wise head-shake, regarding the couple very

lovingly in spite of her rebuking words; and Majorie, prompted by one of her good impulses, responded with sweet earnestness of manner:

"I'm not quite spoiled yet, however, and I want no more spoiling, mind; I've had more than most folks, and now I mean to leave off being childish and useless, and begin a woman's life. It is quite time I should do so, isn't it, papa and mamma?"

As she spoke she put aside her father's hands from her face, caressingly brushing them with her lips ere she did so, and turned round towards her mother.

Mr. Bruce experienced a little pang of jealousy, and interposed hastily, a troubled look on his face: "Time enough, little lass, time enough—never ye fear but care will find ye out yet; dinna ye gang to meet her;" but his wife was too wise to be much impressed by this sudden fit of seriousness.

"Quite time, Marjorie. You've come to woman's years, and it's but right you should do a woman's work in this quick-passing mortal life. I'll warrant we'll none of us think we've done overmuch when we come to give in our account at the end," she said, very gravely, rising from the breakfast-table as she spoke.

"You can help somebody this very morning, if you like, dear," she added, turning round to her with a smile.

"Now, mamma?" the girl asked, rather dubiously, after all. She was not prepared for such an immediate beginning of her useful career.

Mr. Bruce again interposed, once more laying a fondling hand on her head: "Let her be, Mary; she's our one ewe lamb, ye ken," he said, in his foolish, fond way, a suspicious huskiness in his voice.

No sensible woman could have felt aught but vexed, and a shadow of displeasure darkened his wife's serene face.

"I've a shape of calves-foot jelly ready to send to wee Johnnie Annan—maybe he may not live to eat another. It wouldn't hurt you, Marjorie, to take a walk up the hill with it this fine morning. Let it stand, if you like, and I'll send one of the servants up when they've got through their work; only, maybe, the bairn has nothing he can eat meantime."

"Let me go, mamma; I'll be ready in a minute," Marjorie cried, ashamed of her former remissness in visiting this sick child, a special *protege* of her mother's.

"I'll take a walk up with you and have a look at the sheep, Beauty," her father joined in; and so the charitable expedition began with a pleasant, sociable walk.

There was a couple of miles to trudge to the cot-house in which wee Johnnie lay, dully taking his last looks of a world that had certainly been but a dull workaday world to him. A fresh west wind blew, the sun shone, the road wound uphill among open, healthy moorlands where the air was keen and bracing; Marjorie's cheeks glowed like damask roses, and her eyes sparkled with the pleasurable excitement of the walk and the free talk with her droll, loving old companion.

"I want to look at the bonny wee glen where I used to go and gather rowans for necklaces; I have not seen it since I came home. Walk on slowly, papa, and I'll overtake you in a few minutes," she said, when drawing near the little thatched house; and ere he could answer, she was off across the narrow strip of level pasture-land that ran between the road and this tiny valley, a favorite resort in her childish days.

Resting on his oaken staff, the old man watched the graceful running figure disappear down the steep hill-side, thanking God in his heart for her beauty and health, and apparent happiness, though aloud he only hummed a verse of a favorite Scottish love-song:

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And rocks melt wi' the sun;
Yet I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run."

Marjorie came to a sudden stop when half-way down the bank, startled by the discovery of two familiar figures whom she would never have dreamed of finding in company in this sequestered spot.

Down in the hollow, where the rippling waters of a little stream gleamed in the sunshine, stood Mr. Crawford, of the Priory, and Widow Annan's eldest daughter, a pretty, fair-complexioned girl of seventeen, who was looking up into his face with an expression of agonized entreaty, white tears streamed from her eyes, already dimmed with weeping.

The gentleman carried his gun on his shoulder; but Marjorie could not but perceive by the scowl which darkened his pallid, supercilious countenance, that his thoughts were of less agreeable matters than sportsmanship that morning; and, as the only probable explanation of this *te-a-te* flashed upon her, her innocent heart began to throb with mingled indignation and pity.

Little Lizzie Annan, her humble, affectionate playmate in childish days, whom she had made happy with her broken dolls and despised sweetmeats such a short time ago, now looking up into that bad man's face so forlornly—keeping such a piteously eager hold of his sleeve as if she could not trust him even to listen to her—all the sweet freshness of her Irish beauty dimmed by a shadow of shame and suffering that had fallen on her young life, while Marjorie, quite forgetful of her existence, had been selfishly engrossed with schemes for her own enjoyment and success in the world.

She remembered now old Bell's inveterate dislike for this man, and attempts to warn her from allowing herself to be drawn into familiar acquaintanceship with him and felt ashamed of her former ill-humor when the faithful old servant had spoken out of her honest heart.

No doubt, Lizzie, who for the last year had been employed as nurse-girl in the family of a sister of Mr. Crawford, residing within a couple of miles of the Priory, had been the victim of his cruel sensuality; only

thus could she account for her sadly changed appearance, her tearful pleadings.

All these thoughts occurred to Marjorie in rapid succession; then, acting on overpowering impulse, she cried out the girl's name, thereby causing the engrossed couple to turn towards her in guilty consternation.

Midway on the bank, by the clump of young rowan-trees, she stood, erect, graceful, beautiful; a half-stern, half-pitying look in her eyes fixed upon the flushed, tear-stained, frightened face of her old playmate. Involuntarily the man admired her, and contrasted her with poor Lizzie, greatly to the latter's disadvantage.

"Stay where you are, you fool! I'll account for your being here," he said with an oath, to the girl, speaking in a hasty whisper, and impressing his words with a glance of no good will; then he took a step or two towards Marjorie, who wished to ignore his presence.

"Good-morning, Miss Bruce. We meet in quite a romantic situation this morning. I am quite aware it looks highly ridiculous to be caught as I am," he simpered, advancing in spite of the haughty, repellent look with which Marjorie favored him.

"Come with me, Lizzie, for the sake of long ago when we were little children together. Do believe that I am your true friend still," she said, controlling herself with difficulty, and avoiding the gentleman's deprecating eyes.

The appeal, very gently spoken, was too much for Lizzie, a foolish, credulous little rustic with a very soft heart. Putting her hands before her face, she began to sob, rocking herself to and fro, and uttering incoherent exclamations of despair and abject misery, which confirmed Marjorie in her previous suspicions, alas! too correct.

A brilliant idea occurred to Mr. Crawford, who had been cudgeling his brains for a plausible explanation of the case. Ingeniously mingling truth and falsehood, he proceeded:

"Listen to me one moment, Miss Bruce. The girl is in distress because my sister has dismissed her in a fit of passion to-day. Seeing me pass the cottage (she went home to her mother last night when ordered off from her situation), she followed me here to get me to intercede for her. I know my poor sister's temper is hasty, and shall do my best for the poor thing."

Marjorie, little accustomed to hearing specious stories, breathed more freely; though, with the relief of believing Lizzie's distress easily accounted for in this way, came her first apprehension of the awkwardness of her own position.

Blushing, she explained how she chanced to be there, and announced her intention of hurrying to overtake her father.

"Come up to your mother's house, Lizzie, and tell me all about your troubles; I am going straight there; by-and-by you'll go home with me, and we'll get mamma's advice. Do come, like a good girl," pleaded she, as Lizzie continued to sob, and Mr. Crawford, biting his lip in vexation, watched the effect of this appeal.

Glancing at the gentleman as if for permission, and reading a warning to secrecy in his eyes, for a moment fixed eagerly on hers, Lizzie moved slowly towards the young lady, drying her eyes, and making an effort to stop the convulsive heaving of her bosom.

"Be on your guard, and all will be well yet. If you betray me, I wash my hands of you forever; so beware!" Mr. Crawford said, in a rapid whisper, stepping towards her as if to help her up the bank; and with a piteous glance of submission she intimated her promise to obey him.

Relieved, he stepped up to Marjorie, leaving her to follow.

"You will bid me a friendly good-morning now, will you not, Miss Bruce? Don't be so hard on a poor fellow who cares more about pleasing you than about anything else in the world, by Jove!" said he, putting out his hand and looking into her face with amorous eyes.

An unconquerable feeling of aversion and distrust made her draw back, refusing to take his offered hand.

Giving him a very cold little bow, she said, with no lack of becoming, dignified gravity, "I should feel very much grieved if I believed you to speak seriously, Mr. Crawford;" then, unheeding his protest of perfect good faith and remonstrance against her unkindness, she once more turned to Lizzie, humbly waiting a little aside.

"Make haste, Lizzie. I have kept my father waiting too long already."

Mr. Crawford watched the two move off side by side, a very unpleasant scowl on his face.

"You shall sing another tune yet, young lady!" he muttered, admiring, even in his angry mortification, her free, light step and graceful carriage, the more noticeable because of her companion's drooping gait; "though I make a confounded fool of myself in the eyes of the world, and pay a high price for my conquest, you shall smile on me yet."

Yes; since it was time for him to stop sowing his wild oats, he would marry the pretty maid who suited his fancy, and throw prudential considerations to the winds. She would hold up her head among the county ladies yet, the saucy little baggage, and wear the honors of her position more gracefully than any one among them.

Even though that silly, rustic sweetheart, whom he found it so hard to shake off, should yet divulge the secret of his amour with her, he had nothing to fear. Girls were not such prudes as they pretended to be, and he had too tempting a share of the world's most coveted good things to be expected to lead a perfectly correct life. Since Lord Castleton was an engaged man, the foolish little beauty's flirtation with him was likely to be short-lived; and, as she was doubtless a little heart-sore at the failure of her schemes to entrap the young nobleman, she was the more likely to catch joy-

fully at the opportunity of rising in life which his meditated proposal would offer her.

So the calculating, yet blundering, young libertine thought as he strolled away down the peaceful little glen, deaf to the sweet ripple of the burn at his feet, blind to the beauty of the fresh autumn morning—as despicable a specimen of humanity as ever disgraced an ancient name.

CHAPTER XI.

A STOLEN KISS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

With a heavy heart Marjorie returned from her visit to the cot-house. The widow's careworn, stern face had several times been turned towards Lizzie with a look which haunted her, it told so unmistakably her belief in her young daughter's fall, and her inability to regard her without contemptuous aversion. The girl herself, spite of her denial of any culpability, crept about her familiar old home with the air of one bitterly conscious of bringing shame to a hitherto respectable family. Watching her tend her little dying brother with a pitiful eagerness to please him, Marjorie came to the conclusion that a remorseful yearning to soothe his last hours alone kept her from deserting her native place.

Nor did Mrs. Bruce's reception of her daughter's news, communicated to her in confidence, tend to comfort her. Stopping her sewing as she sat in the little parlor: "I am grieved I sent you up there, my dear," said that prudent lady, looking very grave and regretful. "You must not go back while Lizzie is there. Dear she will give her mother a heavy heart to carry all the rest of her days, and the decent body has had her share of troubles already;" and she ended with a long-drawn sigh.

"But Lizzie looks so miserable, mamma; and she is such a child—two years younger than I—only think, if I can do anything for her you will let me do it, won't you?" pleaded Marjorie, tears springing to her eyes, and her pretty lips quivering. But her mother was inexorable.

"Hush, Maja, love," she said, kindly but resolutely; you must not speak or think of that girl any more. I'll go up and see her and her mother to-night, and if anything can be done for her I'll see to it, for her mother's sake; but I'm grieved that a young lady like you should dream of having any intercourse whatever with such a girl as that."

Marjorie blushed and was silent, though in her heart she protested against her young ladyhood being thus brought forward as a reason why she should stand aloof from any miserable fellow-mortal, however sinful.

"Get your practising done now, dear, and don't think any more about this, there's a good girl," Mrs. Bruce said, presently, looking up from her sewing; and thereupon, a humorous fancy occurring to her, her volatile daughter raised her fair, drooping head, and laughed her silvery little laugh, a sudden sunshine of mirth lighting up her face.

"After all, mamma," she said, "a young lady is expected to show a good deal of heathenish indifference to her fellow-creatures. Don't you think some less practical religion than ours would be more suited for women of the better class—up to a certain age, of course? Meanwhile, lest the code of proprieties should be broken, it is safe to be theoretically Christian, I fancy," she continued, in the hope of provoking her mother to a retort, as that lady took no notice of her first remark, though her comely face had flushed rather suspiciously.

She looked at her now with an earnest gentleness of expression which made Marjorie ashamed of her levity.

"No, no, my dear," she said, a tinge of self-reproach in her tone; "to be good is the great matter, and, maybe, my old-fashioned notions of the kind of Christian work fit for a girl like you are mistaken. My mother taught them to me, and she was as good a woman as ever lived. I have found them wide enough for me, Maja; but it may be they seem narrow to you, in this age of progress. Your own conscience will tell you all you need when you are in doubt as to what is right for you to do."

Marjorie interrupted her, coming up behind her chair and kissing her affectionately.

"It tells me now that I am an impudent, ungrateful, conceited young wretch, and don't deserve such a treasure of a mother one bit," she said, in her hearty, impulsive way, making her mother laugh in spite of herself.

"When do you mean to leave off being a child, Maja?" she said, shaking her head, and looking at her with a very well satisfied expression.

"When do you mean to let me leave off, mamma?" laughed the girl. "You take such good care of me that I can't grow."

Was there a tinge of serious feeling in her jesting words! Her mother thought so, and grew grave again. "Very well, my dear," she said in a tone of heart-felt sincerity; "we must mend that, and you must show us how sensible and good a woman you can grow into."

Miss Marjorie's will-of-the-wisp species of goodness often perplexed her staid mother. Her retort now startled her.

"I am very well as I am, on the whole, mamma," she said, lightly; and, the door opening just then to admit young Mr. Alton, she turned to him, saying, with an air of coquetry.

"Mamma has been suggesting improvement to me, and I have been telling her that I am very well as I am; is it not so?"

She threw one of her gayest looks at him, and, as she spoke, her rosy lips parted, giving a momentary glimpse of the prettiest little teeth imaginable.

She held out a tiny, coaxing hand, and he was

charmed in spite of himself, though he only smiled in a grave, rather absent way.

Since leaving her the previous evening, he had resolved to tell her frankly of his love, and find out whether he might hope to win her as his wife. He felt almost sure that her girlish heart had never yet known any deeper love than a mere passing fancy for the gay, handsome young nobleman into whose society unlucky accident had thrown her, and it seemed to him that love so overpowering as his could not fail to awaken some responsive feeling in such a young, impressionable creature.

Already they were friends, and it was easy to conceive the possibility of her gradually learning to return his love, but he believed it only upright dealing to let her know his hopes.

Of *finesse* John Alton was utterly devoid. He was wont to approach his aims by the straightest of paths, and to bear his defeats with the quiet dignity of a man who has done nothing to forfeit respect, though he has failed to achieve success. Even so would he conduct his wooing now.

"Am I not very well as I am, Mr. Alton?" repeated the girl this time, with a little impatient tap of her tiny foot upon the floor. She liked gallant replies when she was in a coquettish mood, and it irritated her to see the young man linger a moment or two longer than was absolutely necessary to greet her mother, while she waited for him with extended hand.

"For shame, Maja!" said Mrs. Bruce, inwardly marveling over the laxity of discipline in fashionable boarding-schools which turned out such finished specimens as this pretty hoyden. In her young days girls came home from such institutions with the quietest of manners and the most studied correctness of behavior—a credit alike to the teachers they had left and to the friends whose duty it was to introduce them to society; and she heaved a sigh of regret for the good old fashions which this startling young generation scrupled not to turn into ridicule.

John Alton's face lighted up with a half-tender, half-humorous smile as he shook hands with the girl. Her coquetry he had come to look upon as the most venial of faults—a little failing which belonged to her natural disposition, as playfulness does to a kitten's, and which time would certainly cure, or at least tone down into harmless sprightliness.

"You change so often that it is hard to say what you are, you see," he said, with his pleasant assurance, detaining her hand in his, and looking down at her with kind, smiling, dark eyes.

She pouted, and sat down in her father's easy-chair by the fire, half turning her back to him, and throwing him a rather cross look over her shoulder.

"Nobody but a Scotchman, and one who had lived his days in his own country, would give a woman such a bearish answer as that," she said, horrifying her mother by her impudence, though Mr. Alton only laughed.

"Define bearish for my benefit, please, Miss Marjorie; I have a dreadful suspicion that it means rude."

"So it does; at least, it often means honest, which is much the same thing in well-bred society, I fancy."

The pretty maid wheeled round as she spoke, and looked apologetically at him, her momentary ill-humor forgotten.

"If so, I am content to be bearish, then," he said, returning her friendly look; then he went back to Mrs. Bruce, and, seating himself on the sofa beside her, began to speak of such matters as lay more within her conversational range, for in all essentials this hero of mine was a thorough gentleman.

Marjorie had a quick perception for such little traits of character, and she admired the young man's genuine courtesy, acknowledging inwardly that it was a much nobler grace than the easy, lazy politeness which sat so well upon Lord Castleton.

Still, she wished he would not detain her mother with conversation when she was wearying to hear his promised confidences, and she could not refrain from throwing an occasional impatient glance at the couple of friends.

Always willing to give John Alton a favorable opportunity of paying his court to Marjorie, Mrs. Bruce was not long in finding an excuse for leaving the room.

Ere she went away, she made the young people move into the drawing-room, explaining that it was almost time to let the table-maid prepare the room for their early dinner.

The drawing-room was a bright, tastefully furnished apartment at the front of the house. Until Marjorie's home-coming it had stood empty, her parents having no use for it; but in honor of the young lady it had been prettily fitted up, and was now meant for her special *sanctum*.

Sunshine streamed in at its three windows, a bright fire burned in the brilliantly-polished steel grate, flowers from the Torwood House conservatories diffused a faint, sweet fragrance, and John Alton, accustomed to the rough comfort of his bachelor sitting-room, felt, with a pang at his honest heart, that the graceful girl who sat opposite to him, lazily enjoying a swing in her rocking-chair, had a sort of prescriptive right to luxuries with which only a rich man could surround his wife.

And then for a moment he had a visionary glimpse of a fair, luxurious country home, surrounded by its modest park and trimly-kept gardens—such a place as befitted a man of means—where the little lady would have her horses and her servants, and harmless, expensive recreations, and he would be happy in the consciousness of her enjoyment of these things to him so immaterial.

All this awaited him if he but chose to stretch out his hand for it—all this and a great deal more which wealth can purchase; for only the other day he had been

officially notified of his legal right to a fortune of over sixty thousand pounds, bequeathed to him by an uncle in Chicago, lately deceased.

And the strange, provoking thing was, that the young man felt in his heart an unconquerable aversion to stretch out that honest hand of his for what was legally his own.

It seemed to him that if he did so it would be an honest hand no longer. His uncle's will had been made in a fit of fury, caused by his only son's refusal to contract a mercenary marriage at his bidding. On his death-bed he had repented of his injustice, and made a futile effort to undo his ill-considered act. Such was the account of the matter that had come home.

John Alton knew his cousin's sterling worth, and fully believed his statements. When boys they had been schoolmates, and to this day he regarded him with the kindest of sentiments.

Let him keep his father's money, and the old man rest in his far-away grave; he, John Alton, wanted none of it. Self-respect was a possession too precious to be bartered for any amount of worldly gain. Please God he would hold up his head among the upright of the earth, walking in the light of his smile, nor grovel in the mire of selfish money-getting and mere material indulgences.

Nor was there any need to recount his temptation to this innocent little woman, who might, in her girlish enthusiasm, magnify a simple act of justice into one of heroic renunciation. An unworthy craving for approbation had surely prompted his last night's resolve to tell her the whole case; in his inmost thoughts he had known the right course all along, and ought not to have dreamed of seeking counsel.

In the course of a minute or two these reflections occurred to him, while Marjorie, with tolerable patience, waited for the expected confidences.

She was a good deal disappointed when she presently discovered that her curiosity was not at this time to be gratified.

"Miss Bruce," he said, rousing himself from his abstraction, and smiling in a grave, deprecating way, as he looked across the fireplace to her, "did you ever make a plan overnight, thinking it quite a harmless project and discover next day that it was of quite a different character, and must not be put into execution? That is what I have been doing, I am sorry to say."

"I don't in the least understand what you mean; I have the stupidest head in the world when it comes to guessing enigmas. One thing I am pretty sure of is, that none of your projects could be very wicked."

He smiled again, and was careful to speak more explicitly.

"Last night I proposed to trouble you with perplexities which I now find were quite self-made: some day I may tell you all about them, and let you take me to task for needing time and reflection to find out my duty in the circumstances; this morning I am going to speak of something of far more consequence."

There was a slight tremor in his voice, a great earnestness in his look, and Marjorie had a presentiment of what he was going to say; yet, spoiled girl as she was, felt more piqued at the withholding of his promised narration than interested in what was coming.

"I am glad to find I am not the only changeable person in the world," she said, lightly throwing up her pretty head with rather an offended air.

The honest young fellow was puzzled. He could not believe that it was mere piqued curiosity which caused this change in her manner, and he looked at her in surprise.

"You very good people don't need friends at all, it seems to me, Mr. Alton," the wayward beauty next said, petulantly. "One feels it useless to offer sympathy to such superior beings, so sufficient to themselves; one can only admire and worship them afar off."

While she spoke she was thinking within herself how noble in his straightforward uprightness of life the young man was; how wonderfully patient with weakness and waywardness like hers; how very near being in love with him she felt.

If his proposal had been made at that moment, it would have found a not unwilling listener, spite of her pert speech; but, as unlucky chance would have it, it was not made then.

While John Alton hesitated, a little displeased by this unprovoked attack, the housemaid flung open the drawing-room door, ushering in Lord Castleton.

"Don't let me disturb you, I have not time to stay; I only bring you a novel Dolly thought you would like, Miss Bruce," the new-comer said, pausing on the threshold and nodding a perfectly affable, smiling greeting to the two occupants of the room.

A glance at them convinced him that he had interrupted a *tele-a-tele* of special interest, and the blush with which Marjorie advanced to meet him corroborated his belief.

So the pretty damsel was not troubling her head with thoughts of him, after all; his tears and penitence had been quite unnecessary. If anybody was heart-sore it was himself, not her.

He was rejoiced that this should be the case, he told himself; yet his handsome face clouded, and an involuntary sigh escaped him.

"Won't you sit down and rest a little, Lord Castleton?" asked Marjorie, looking up into his face as she gave him her hand, and he fancied rightly that she was not unwilling to have him stay.

"Only a few minutes, then, thank you," he answered, advancing into the room. "Don't go away, Mr. Alton, I beg," he said, frankly, extending his hand to him.

Mr. Alton smiled, and excused himself for leaving, saying he wished to see some cattle of Mr. Bruce's, but would return in a short time. He had no wish to leave Marjorie to the danger of his flattering attentions, but felt that his continual presence was not desired by either of them.

And so presently the two young folk, who had been so near falling over head and ears in love with each other, found themselves alone together for the first time since the open acknowledgement of that engagement which virtually bound them to give up their pleasant, flirting intimacy.

Capricious Marjorie looked at her *ex-dévant* admirer with an unwonted sweet pensiveness of expression, as, throwing himself into John Alton's vacated chair, he stared thoughtfully into the fire, absently stroking his fair mustache.

All was over between them now, she thought. Her foolish, childish fancy for him was already a thing of the past; somebody else was stealing her heart bit by bit, and would end by carrying her off as his wife. It was her destiny, and she was well enough content with it, on the whole; yet she could not but sigh for the loss of the deliciously idle, sunny hours that were gone forever.

She wondered if he was really sad at heart; if Miss Lisle bored him; if he sometimes, in the coming years of his married life, would think regretfully of her silly, fickle self, only yesterday sobbing because he was about to marry somebody else, to-day unable to feel very unhappy about the arrangement.

Only yesterday! So much had happened since then, that it seemed to her quite a long time ago. She thought with an inward sigh that it was really too soon to be lending a willing ear to the suit of another, and that she was bound to stave off John Alton's impending proposal.

"I have a presentiment that it will soon be my turn to offer congratulations," his lordship said, presently, looking at her with a keen, inquiring gaze, a lurking shadow of discontent in the smile with which he spoke.

Marjorie blushed and dropped her eyes in suspicious haste, though she answered lightly, "I have always understood that it is hopeless to argue against a presentiment, Lord Castleton."

Her manner made him fancy that his surmises were correct, and he forced himself to show a friendly interest.

Why should not the pretty little girl have a lover, and be happy in her own fashion? Of course he had known that she was only flirting with him all this time; he would have hated himself had he seriously supposed anything else.

"Nobody will ever be more sincere than I in wishing you well, Miss Maja," he said, smothering a sigh.

Maja had had enough of banter that morning, and declined to avail herself of this opportunity for showing her talent for repartee.

She uplifted sweetly pensive dark eyes to his, and said, with a sigh, "There now, Lord Castleton, you have said what you thought yourself bound to say. Now, can't you let us have a sensible chat? It seems to me that it must be delightful to be a man, and so have one's friends treat you as a reasonable creature. When I am quite an old woman I suppose I shall be treated so; but it is long to wait," added she, with a smiling glance into her companion's face, still decidedly cloudy.

"Yes, indeed," he said, absently, heaving another sigh, and keeping his eyes on the fire.

Maja found him rather tiresome, and exerted herself to rouse him.

"Tell me what you are all doing at Torwood House. Give me news of yourself," she went on presently, a touch of coquettish coaxing in her voice, and the young man looked up at last.

She was sitting where the sunshine streamed around her, her little hands meekly resting in her lap, her downcast eyes softly shaded by the prettiest of long-curved eyelashes, a faint blush warming up the youthful brunette face, a gentle pensive grace adding a new charm to her whole figure, and for a moment he forgot himself in a fervor of admiration and longing for her love.

"You don't really care a bit about me, do you, you bonny dear little thing?" he said, coming across to her and putting a caressing hand on her shoulder. Then, a flush of passionate feeling suffusing his fair, handsome face, he bent down his head and kissed her glowing cheek. The foolish girl was not at all displeased, though she drew herself up with a haughty air of surprise.

"I beg your pardon, Maja; you have a right to be angry with me," his lordship said, quickly drawing back from her, keenly ashamed of his folly, and his voice trembled as he spoke.

She did not well know what to say, so only threw him a comical, reassuring glance, and went on slowly swinging in her rocking-chair, her eyes demurely cast down, and her lips firmly set together to prevent her smiling, for at heart she did not think very severely of his offense.

But Lord Castleton was in no mood for trifling. For once at least he was in mighty earnest, feeling the fever of his heart to be no jesting matter.

"If I had known I could be such a fool I would never have come to see you. Good-bye; I must go," he said, with some ill-humor. Then, as Marjorie looked at him with as innocent an air of surprise as she could muster, he added, quite savagely, as it seemed to her, "You carry your flirting a little too far; you forget that what is child's play to you may be a very dangerous diversion to a poor fool who likes you, too well for his own good or yours."

He was horribly unjust and unpolite, Marjorie thought, yet she had never felt so warmly towards him as just at that moment. However, she made a protest.

"You have no right to speak so to me, and I won't bear it!" she said, rising to her feet and flashing an angry look at him; then, over-excited and confused, she began to cry.

Lord Castleton looked at her reluctantly, and felt

capable of making a yet greater fool of himself, but he struggled against his temptation.

"Good-bye, Maja; I was only joking. You haven't done anything very wicked, after all," he said, taking her hand and giving it a friendly pressure; then, ere she could find something to say, he went off, leaving her to recover her composure as best she could.

And John Alton went home that day with a heavy weight at his honest heart and a mist of unshed tears in his eyes.

Marjorie had refused him, with all possible demonstration of friendly esteem, yet in such a way as left no room for believing her likely to listen favorably to any renewal of his offer.

So at least it seemed to him, sadly recalling the confused, blushing looks with which she had answered in the negative his earnest, honest inquiry whether she loved another.

"Never mind, father, I dare say it's all for the best; and no doubt I'll miss poor Will's money the less by remaining a sober old bachelor," he said, forcing a smile, and giving the old man's hand an eloquent pressure, when, as they sat together that evening, he told him of his disappointment.

"Women are a queer lot for the most part, and maybe you're best clear o' them, my lad," quoth his father, with a rueful, loving look; and thereupon the young man smiled again, determined to carry his burden of sorrow like a brave sufferer.

"So our grapes are sour, after all, father," he said; adding, with a sort of pathetic humor. "Well, it is not everybody's lot to come at the sweet grapes in this life; fortunately one can live without that luxury."

"And you will get over it, eh, John?" questioned his father, anxiously trying to read his face.

"Never you fear about that, father; and now let us bring out our comforters and think of something else," was his response as he rose to get the pipes; and, thanks to him, the evening was passed in quiet cheerfulness, after all.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. VESSEY'S ADVICE.

"But Aunt Vessey has such claims upon me, Herbert; she has no other near relatives, and her health really depends on her going South this winter, she tells me. It is my simple duty to go with her for a month or two anyhow," said Miss Lisle, sighing; and, looking up from the letter opened before her, she fixed pleading eyes on her betrothed, who was frowning determinedly.

"Oh, bother Aunt Vessey! You know well enough that her ailments are fanciful. She wants you to do all the troublesome part of the traveling with which she won't trust her servants, and then to settle her comfortably at Mentone, and devote yourself to amusing and nursing her until she has recruited for the next London season. Don't I know how she has imposed on your good nature before?" he responds, with impatience.

"You ought not to speak so of her, Herbert," Miss Lisle says, rebukingly.

"And you ought not to let her hang like the Old Man of the Sea round your poor little neck all the days of your life," he retorts, looking slightly ashamed of his ill-humor.

The Torwood House family was gathered round the breakfast-table, and Miss Lisle had just explained how this Aunt Vessey had written, begging her to pass some time with her at Mentone, whither she was shortly going.

Lady Castleton watched the couple of disputants in silence; but Lady Dorothea broke out into eager speech, her sunny face clouding over as the real state of the case dawned on her.

"Oh, what a horrid shame of Mrs. Vessey! Surely, you'll never go and leave us for her, Nessie, and have us lose all the fun of seeing you get your marriage things and everything?" she said, with lugubrious vagueness, making them all smile.

"Since you talk of duty, Nessie, let me remind you Mrs. Vessey is not the only person to whom you owe a duty," his handsome young lordship went on, with a decidedly ill-used air, casting a reproachful look at his cousin, who was wonderfully gratified by this pettish bringing forward of his claims upon her.

"Of course I shall be guided by your wishes, Herbert," she said, with a blush and an answering glance of sweet submission; and then the young man's face cleared, and he recovered his wonted easy good-humor.

"Thank you, Nessie," he said, rising and going up to her with extended hand, though he was not usually so demonstrative in his manner towards her when others were present.

Lady Castleton looked at the couple in some surprise. She had not believed her son likely to be so unwilling to have his marriage delayed for a short time, no day having yet been fixed for its celebration.

"Tell Mrs. Vessey that your hands are filled with a different sort of patient, Ernestine," she said, going up to them and laying a kind hand on the young lady's shoulder; and as she spoke she smiled up into her son's face.

Lady Castleton's smile seldom wanted a faint shadow of sadness, which most people found very touching.

Her son was moved by it now, and answered her look by one of sincere affection, though he spoke with seeming levity.

"Mamma knows that I want looking after badly, Nessie; and she thinks you are the very person to keep me in order," he explained, laughing.

"But what is to become of Aunt Vessey?" asked Miss Lisle, looking appealingly at them all three, considerable dismay in her expression.

"She has her companion, her maid, and her lapdog. She will find out a pet doctor wherever she goes. Mrs.

Vessey can do without you quite comfortably," spoke Lady Castleton, sarcastically.

Lord Castleton pulled a ludicrously long face, and glanced over to his sister.

"We must send Dolly—poor little Dolly! There is no help for it," he said, with a twinkle of fun in his blue eyes; and that young lady uttered a little shriek of protest, which made everybody laugh.

Evidently Mrs. Vessey was no favorite in the family.

Miss Lisle attempted to speak in defense of the absent lady.

"It is too bad to laugh at her so," she said, in a mildly reproachful tone. "She is my father's sister; she brought me up, and she is very kind in her own way. She really means very well."

"So do we all mean very well, Nessie—all but a few wicked wretches who come to be hanged. It is the easiest thing in the world. I ought to know, for I excel in that pleasant virtue," laughed Lord Castleton; and his mother moved away, saying nothing, a sarcastic smile on her face.

Lady Dorothea presently followed her, and the engaged couple were left alone.

"So you would have left me, Nessie?" said the earl, looking sadly down into his cousin's face, upturned to him with a smile, as he continued to hang over her chair.

"I did not think you would have cared—at least not more than a little," she answered, without the least coquetry; and he was touched by the uncomplaining sweetness with which she made this admission.

He colored and looked down, remembering with a keen pang of remorse various occasions on which he had been foolish enough to neglect her for the sake of that charming witch, Marjorie Bruce.

"Ah, but I do care, Nessie!" he said, taking her hand, and speaking in a very heartfelt tone.

His good, faithful little friend and betrothed, who had scarcely a word or a smile for any man in the world but him—who loved him so dearly—of course he did care. Besides, though he was scarcely aware of it, he was afraid to be left alone; a vague self-distrust haunted him, suggesting strange possibilities.

And for the first time since they were little children together, his cousin, sweetly blushing, held up her face for a kiss, thereby touching his heart mightily, and bringing a momentary dimness of vision to his lazy, kind eyes.

"We'll get Lady Castleton to have Mrs. Vessey down here for a little, and we'll all talk her into good-humor," he presently said, anxious to make amends for his former indifference to a matter in which she was interested; and so it came about that Mrs. Vessey shortly appeared at Torwood House, causing a good deal of alteration in the ways of the household.

Mrs. Vessey was a thorough woman of the world at heart, though she prided herself upon having a great deal of sentiment in her composition. She worshipped success in all its forms, and had very little patience with unlucky mortals upon whom Dame Fortune refused to smile.

Her companion, a decayed gentlewoman of nervous temperament, lived in slavish subjection to her, and found life under the circumstances extremely hard; but to the bulk of her acquaintances she was extremely kind and agreeable in manner—a little too gushing, perhaps; but that, friendly critics declared, was a venial fault arising from an impulsive nature.

If she was not a favorite at Torwood House, it must be remembered that the family there were odd beings, guilty of many startling breaches of the world's code, and strangely indifferent about matters which other people in their position considered of vital importance.

But for their high rank, which entitled them to perpetrate any amount of harmless absurdities, Mrs. Vessey would have been greatly disgusted with their ways; and she never came to them without finding many occasions for exhibiting the courteous forbearance and readiness to make charitable constructions becoming a Christian woman of the world.

Lord Castleton alone gave her ample scope for the exercise of these virtues. Apparently quite unmoved by the affectionate friendliness she took pains to show him as the betrothed of her niece, and a very eligible part for that plain, though wealthy, young lady, he took a strange pleasure in provoking her, and was never done saying and doing the most extraordinary things when she was present.

Then Lady Castleton was cold and reserved, and lived half of her time in dreamland—a far-away, unexplored, uninteresting country to this poor lady.

"One might just as well think of getting up a friendship with a block of ice as with a woman like her," she observed one day to Miss Lisle, as the two sat together over the fire in the latter's cosy dressing-room, waiting the summons of the first dressing-bell.

"Between ourselves, Ernestine, I pity you with a mother-in-law so unfeeling and selfish, my poor child," she went on, in a whisper of lugubrious tone, heaving a deep sigh, and shaking her head as she looked at her niece.

"Draw a little nearer this nice fire and get your feet comfortably toasted before going down-stairs, darling," she added, with fond anxiety of expression as her companion gave a slight shiver.

Mrs. Vessey was a little, plump, fair-complexioned woman, who had been very pretty in her youth, and thought herself sufficiently fascinating even yet. She had a bland smile, capable of various degrees of amiability; a coaxing, confidential manner to those she wished to please; and at present, sitting in gossip-favoring circumstances, her feet on the fender, a tiny cup of fragrant coffee in her pretty, plump hand, sparkling with diamonds, a perfectly safe, if rather undemonstrative, confidante opposite her, she was in her best of moods.

"I trust you may be happy in your married life, my

poor darling. After all, what is marriage but a dreadful leap in the dark?" she said again, as Miss Lisle, a good deal vexed at hearing her speak thus of Lady Castleton, maintained a rebuking silence; and as she spoke she heaved another sigh, and looked as if she had more on her mind than she was willing to communicate without encouragement.

Mrs. Vessey was rather fond of mysteries, as her niece was aware, and made a very little one appear wonderfully large now and then, so she did not seek to draw her out on this subject.

"Herbert and I have known each other all our lives, Aunt Vessey," she said, smiling. "I dare say we know the worst and the best of each other already, and shall get on very well."

Mrs. Vessey took a sip of her coffee and looked pensively into the fire.

"You were always very easy about your own rights, my poor Ernestine. I need not be surprised to find you the same, now you are engaged," she remarked, in a meaning tone.

Miss Lisle smiled, thinking of the many quiet battles she had fought in defense of her own rights in girlish days, when Aunt Vessey had certainly shown a disposition to domineer over her.

"If poor Ernestine had a fault it was temper," Mrs. Vessey was wont to admit in confidence. She had fallen into a habit of calling her "poor Ernestine" when the girl was a little plain-looking, wan child, with shy, reserved ways that annoyed her; and it was difficult to lay it aside now, though the epithet was certainly very inappropriate. In a confidential, whispering tone she presently spoke again:

"However, my child, I should quietly ask Lady Castleton to drop that pretty humble friend of Lady Dorothea's. That sort of girl is extremely dangerous about a house with an unmarried young gentleman in it; just enough of a lady to make one forget her real position, and yet not enough to keep men at a proper distance. I have seen no end of mischief done by designing girls of that description. I thought of saying a warning word to Lady Castleton myself, but really she is a formidable character for an outsider like me to approach on the subject."

"Oh, Aunt Vessey! let us speak of something else. I have perfect trust in Lord Castleton always behaving like a man of honor, and I have not a shadow of a reason for suspecting Marjorie Bruce of being a designing girl. I should have felt bitterly ashamed if you had spoken as you have done to me to any one of the family," Miss Lisle said, rousing into animation at last, and speaking with impatience of look and tone.

Now, Mrs. Vessey did not like to be snubbed when giving friendly advice, and in the momentary heat occasioned by the young lady's words she uttered a taunt which directly after she would have been glad to recall.

"You are certainly wise to stay in Scotland. If a young man sees a very pretty girl almost constantly, and there is nobody by to keep a lookout on their proceedings, he is apt to forget that he is engaged."

Miss Lisle grew first pale and then red. "That is enough, Aunt Vessey," she said, with considerable acuteness, looking at her with a pair of very grave, surprised eyes. Then, the dressing-bell beginning to ring, she rose and called her maid from an inner apartment, giving Mrs. Vessey no time to offer the apology she was longing to make.

And while her maid was busy with her hair she meditated rather drearily over the possibility Aunt Vessey had suggested, staring hard at the reflection of her own face in the mirror before which she sat.

How should her handsome, gay betrothed escape growing weary of a plain, sad face like that? How would she drag through the long, long years if he did grow weary? Better far that he should marry some one else more like himself in every way. If only he had the wisdom to fall in love in his own sphere she would be resigned. As it was, she would do what lay within her power to give him ample time for consideration.

So at the earliest opportunity she sought Lord Castleton with so earnest a petition for his consent to her accompanying Mrs. Vessey abroad for a couple of months that he could not refuse her; and their marriage was once more delayed, early spring being now spoken of as the time likely for it to come off.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARJORIE IN LOVE.

I do not know whether I shall surprise my readers by the announcement that my heroine was at last in love. I fear I have dwelt too much on her vivacity, her coquetry, her child-like impulsiveness, and failed in bringing forward instances of her nobler, deeper qualities; so that now it will be somewhat difficult to conceive her capable of tender, passionate devotion.

As in some countries spring comes with a rush, accomplishing marvelous changes in an incredible short space of time, so to many youthful souls comes the great magician Love, forcing into sudden maturity thoughts and emotions whose germs have long lain hidden in the undeveloped nature, startling the on-lookers with revelations of hitherto unsuspected capabilities.

So it was with Marjorie.

She was angry with herself that it should be so impossible to give a reasonable explanation of the change she felt within. She fought against the overpowering passion with secret tears and prayers. She took herself to task for selfish absorption in one feeling, but she was hopelessly deep in first love, and all this was of no avail.

That stolen kiss, those half dozen fond words of Lord Castleton's recorded in a previous chapter, were the seeds which, falling on a girlish heart already prepa-

seemed in his favor by his many preceding marks of special liking, sprung up in this unlooked-for form.

If he had not seemed so mightily in earnest when he reproached her for her coquetry, if he had not hurried away in such a becoming rage with himself, there would not have been so much mischief done. Woman-like, her heart went out to him, because he was evidently unhappy and tormented with contradictory impulses, even more than because he loved her.

She used to lie awake at nights thinking over each chance word he had addressed to her, conjuring up each change of expression his face had assumed, letting her fancy suggest romantic pictures of the future that might yet be hers if only he was free from that mistaken engagement.

She did not consciously love him the better because he was the Earl of Castleton, the lord of many fair acres. It seemed to her, now, that her ambition was overpowered by her love for him himself; that, taken out of his position by any strange accident of fortune, she would cling to him with even greater intensity of fondness.

Marjorie's conscience did not allow her much steady happiness at this time. Poor Miss Lisle's plain, grave face was constantly coming in like a haunting ghost to frighten away the pleasant fancies which would have made life so dreamily happy.

The two girls, though continuing to meet on outwardly friendly terms, had an instinctive distrust of each other, founded on no personal dislike, but on a consciousness of the hopeless irreconcilability of their interests. They avoided each other as much as possible, and Marjorie kept as much away from the Mansion House as she thought she could safely do without arousing surprise.

Lord Castleton and Marjorie strove to make amends for the fault of thinking too much of each other by being studiously careful to avoid all approaches to love-making, and for a long time not a word of tenderness escaped the young man's lips.

Yet chance looks, changes of tone and color, the indescribable telegraphic system of communicating feelings in which young people excel, kept them perfectly well aware of each other's love.

How it was all to end he used occasionally to wonder. He was resolved to marry his cousin, like an honorable man, and let this dear little sweetheart go. No doubt she would soon forget him, and marry happily in her own station; the day would come when they would both look back with no deeper feeling than that of pleasant sentimental regret to this romantic first love of theirs, so painfully sweet now.

Such was his usual conclusion, never arrived at without a deal of unhappy meditation.

Meanwhile, as it was the shooting season, and tolerable sport was to be had on the moors which formed part of his property, he tried to find distraction in the society of other young men of his acquaintance.

Visitors came and went, keeping up a cheery bustle, which made long-continued reflection an impossibility.

Lady Castleton lived more than ever alone, thankfully making over to Mrs. Vesey most of the irksome duties of a hostess, to the latter lady merely pleasantly exciting occupations.

There was nothing Mrs. Vesey enjoyed so much as filling a post of consequence, and happening to be thus suited at Torwood, she was quite content to forget the delicacy of her throat, which had been her excuse for seeking change abroad, and extend her visit of a few days to one of a few weeks.

She petted the three young people of the family with indefatigable affection; she catered for the amusement of the strangers with wonderful assiduity; she coaxed the very servants, and seemed bent on winning laurels as a manager.

Finding it unsafe to meddle with the family protegee, Marjorie Bruce, she took pains to conceal her rooted dislike for her as a presuming, charming minx, who had no business whatever among people of rank, and even honored her with an over-excess of patronizing attention, thereby annoying that fastidious young person more than she would have done by simple neglect.

"Why will not Mrs. Vesey let me alone, Lady Dorothea? A nobody, who is let alone, does not feel herself a nuisance, you see," Marjorie said, smiling, though with a vexed air, as the two girls sat in the painting-room one afternoon.

Lunch was nearly over, and Mrs. Vesey's persistent patronage had been more than usually annoying during that meal. Now, everybody had scattered to their different afternoon amusements, and there was leisure for a confidential chat.

"You are never a nuisance, Maja," said her friend, pausing in the arrangement of her palette, and lifting up a bright, affectionate little face from her work.

"Never to you, I do believe, dear Dolly."

"Never to anybody in the house."

"Ah! you judge everybody to be as little inclined to weary of me as you are yourself. I do believe you like me, and don't care a bit how much of a nobody I happen to be," observed Marjorie, from the rug where she had seated herself in an attitude of easy abandon, and was enjoying the warmth of a cheery wood fire.

"Of course I like you, deary, and we all like you, every one of us," she said, kissing her. Then the girls were startled by the door being opened sufficiently to admit Lord Castleton's good-looking face, now wearing a rather restless look.

"Do I disturb you—may I come in?" he asked, with something of a wistful air, as the pretty couple looked round at him, and, receiving his sister's permission to join them, he came forward.

"Sit down and be comfortable, poor old boy," was Lady Dorothea's greeting, and she pointed to a lounging-chair by the fire.

"Don't get up, Marjorie. He never puts anybody on their best behavior, you know very well," continued the little lady, as Marjorie would have risen; and she

held her down with gentle force, laughing into both their faces with a childlike gleefulness.

Lord Castleton smiled, and did what he was desired, though still looking *distracted* and melancholy.

A fit of blues oppressed him that day, and feeling disinclined for the society of the other gentlemen, he had contrived to snark their shooting party, and was lounging aimlessly about.

Lady Castleton was shut up in the library, Mrs. Vesey and Miss Lisle had driven off to B— on a shopping expedition, and, for a wonder, he found himself quite untrammelled, and likely to be so till dinner.

"I wish you would scold Marjorie, Herbert; she deserves it," Lady Dorothea proceeded. "Only fancy? she calls herself a nuisance to us, and pretends to believe that nobody but me likes her. She is not a bit of a nuisance, is she ever?"

He smiled, and gave a downward glance of unwise tenderness to the dark-haired blushing girl at his feet, then extended his hand to her, saying, in a jesting way:

"No, she is not a bit of a nuisance, Dolly." Innocent Lady Dorothea noticed nothing remarkable in the haste with which her friend dropped the offered hand, coloring and smiling in tell-tale confusion, and went on unhesitating confidence.

"Just when you came in, I was telling her that every one of you liked her. I know you do, Herbert; now, don't you?"

The young man colored and laughed, looking rebukingly at uncomprehending Lady Dorothea, and slightly shaking his head.

A little time ago Marjorie would have enjoyed the fun of the situation, and looked up with demure mischief in her face to hear his reply. Now she was overwhelmed with strange shyness, and would have liked to run away.

"Of course I do, Dolly, you goose," he said, indulging himself in a sidelong look at Marjorie, and feeling selfishly gladdened by a perception of her confusion. He often forgot to look beyond, when chance enabled him to enjoy the present hour.

"It is time for me to go home; you know I never meant to stay to lunch," Marjorie presently remarked, getting on her feet. But to this desertion Lord Castleton and Lady Dorothea made overwhelming opposition, and she was perforce regressed by the fire, this time in an easy-chair opposite his lordship, Lady Dorothea taking a footstool at his feet.

"Now you are both to be good, and let us have a happy, cosy, free-and-easy time; it is so nice to be happy," said her little ladyship, with a sigh of content, smiling in anticipation of coming enjoyment.

"Are you quite comfortable, Herbert? Would you be happier if you had a cigar? Maja and I don't mind smoke a bit—do tell me now, like a good old boy," she went on, taking her brother's hand and staring up into his face with an air of kind solicitude which diverted him.

"Dolly," he said, laughing, as he looked down at her in a very kindly fashion—he was very fond of his odd, pretty sister—"is that footstool soft enough? Are your little feet warm? Is there nothing you would like to eat or drink? Could not I fetch you a picture-book or something of that sort? I don't object to a rattle, mind, if you have a fancy for playing with one."

Lady Dorothea looked nonplussed, and Marjorie interposed.

"Lord Castleton is quizzing you, dear," she said; whereupon her ladyship's puzzled face cleared.

"Oh, I see!" she cried, with imperturbable good-humor. "I don't mind, so as I have somebody to tell me what he is about. Quiz away, Herbert, if that is your way of enjoying yourself. And you're sure you don't miss your cigar?" she questioned, patting his hand.

He shook his head, and threw a comical look at her.

"Well, and what are we to play at?" he said, laughingly. "It seems to me such a little while ago since you two used to look care-worn over that difficulty. We were all very happy then, on the whole, though?" and he ended with a sigh.

"Play at chatting, please do. Who knows when we may have such a cosy hour?" spoke Marjorie, suddenly warming into animation, encouraged by the easy grace of Lord Castleton's manner. She, too, dearly loved sunshine, and was a pretty consistent, though an unconscious, follower of Epicurus.

As she spoke she looked entreatingly at Lord Castleton; this time with an air that was neither shy nor coquettish; and he perceived that she had, like himself, resolved to snatch a little present enjoyment and fling care to the winds.

"Yes, do; it is so easy and nice, and we can say anything that comes uppermost, as there are only we three," said the little sybarite on the footstool, nestling closer to Lord Castleton, and resting her untidy yellow-haired head on his knee.

"Who is to open the ball?" asked Lord Castleton, after a momentary silence; then the trio, as if moved by a spontaneous apprehension of the ridiculous, began to laugh.

"What shall we all be doing this day twelve-month, I wonder?" Lady Dorothea presently suggested, after their laugh was over. "Certainly not sitting laughing here, anyhow," she went on meditatively, staring into the fire.

"I don't see the certainty of that, Dolly," remarked her brother. "Like most of your sex, you seem to find prophecy easier than logic."

"Prophecy, then, for my benefit, Lady Dorothea. I hate logic," said Marjorie, her eyes also fixed on the glowing embers, and a dreamy look beginning to settle on her face.

"Prophecy by all means," echoed the young man, with a sort of sarcastic sadness; and her ladyship, after a little pause, spoke in oracular fashion:

"Herbert and Ernestine will be married and settled down for life. Mamma and I shall be living at The

Cottage (oh dear, how dull it sounds," she interposed with a shrug of her pretty shoulders and a sad shake of her head). "Marjorie will"—she stopped, looking puzzled; then added, with an affectionate glance over at her friend, "No, I give it up. I cannot tell what Marjorie will be doing. I have a sad presentiment that she will have found a real lover, and won't care so much for me or any of us, or I might prophesy that she would be keeping me company at The Cottage, along with one or two other nice visitors."

"How do you think it will be, Herbert? You are far cleverer than poor me," she pursued, Marjorie having thanked her with a quiet, somewhat sad smile, and bent her gaze on the fire again.

"Not cleverer at seeing into a millstone, anyhow, Dolly, you little goose," he answered, with an attempt at speaking gayly; "however, I have no objection to tell you what I think pretty certain to be your lot."

"Do, Herbert," she said, with interest; and both the girls looked at him as he went on.

"You are to be brought out next season, and as our mother hates town life, she will be anxious to get you married and off her hands. Your pretty little head will be turned with a bewildering round of balls, and dinners, and fetes, and all sorts of so-called gayeties. Some eligible young *parti* will turn up, and you will fancy yourself in love with him. You will finish your season in a delightful semi-intoxication of youthful spooniness, then hey for St. George's, Hanover Square. You have read an account of the ceremony there scores of times; a bevy of fair bridesmaids, floating clouds of Brussels lace and white satin, showers of orange-blossoms, episcopal benedictions, flattery *ad libitum*, and off goes Dolly in the carriage-and-four, with the man she does not know to-day sitting by her side, and all the familiar folks she has passed her life among left for good and all—Heigh-ho! I have a good mind to shirk the giving you away, little woman," he ended, with a sigh and a very affectionate look into the innocent, girl-like face upturned to his.

"She won't leave them for good and all. She will come back, Lord Castleton," spoke Marjorie, smiling rather dolefully.

Lord Castleton shook his head.

"No," he said, still looking down at Lady Dorothea. "She won't, I fear—not Dolly, her own careless, irresponsible, natural little self—there's a nice string of adjectives for a lazy fellow to utter *apropos* of his sister. I begin to suspect that I have more than the average amount of fraternal affection, do you know?" and with another sigh he sunk back in his easy-chair, as if overcome by the fatigue of so much speaking.

There fell a meditative silence on the young trio—one of those social silences which are so pleasant, but which come so seldom to most of us in this restless, stirring modern life.

"Somebody said, 'It is always the unforeseen which comes to pass.' If that is true, this day twelve-month will find us all in entirely different combinations of circumstances. Mistress Dolly," spoke Lord Castleton by-and-by, waking up from his abstraction and stretching himself; and he smiled upon both the girls.

He did not calculate the possibility of Marjorie infusing more meaning into his words than, when uttering them, he had intended them to bear; but the girl turned them over and over in her mind, and drew a foolish comfort out of them in after hours of solitude, although now she only laughed and said, gayly:

"I like the man who said that. It would be a horrible thing if we could see the future lying open before us like a long, long, straight road; don't you think the very sight of a turning would put one in ecstasies of good spirits? I vote that we shall all be happy now, and talk about nothing but nonsensical subjects."

"I say ditto to Mr. Burke," responded Lord Castleton, while Lady Dorothea stared nonplussed once more.

They were in the midst of a gay colloquy when an hour later, Miss Lisle newly returned from her drive, took it into her head to seek Lady Dorothea's opinion of some purchases she had been making, and with a preliminary tap entered the painting-room where she supposed her ladyship to be alone.

Miss Lisle's sudden appearance produced a momentary discomposure in the little circle round the fire, though there was no just reason for this being the case. Who has not noticed the inevitable chill which the advent of a new comer brings into a group of chat-enjoying friends—a chill that is quite independent of the nature of the newcomer, who may be one of the dearest and most trusted of confidants?

Miss Lisle, very quick in observation, felt this indefinable chill now, though she came forward with her well-bred smile and serene bearing.

"What lazy people you are, to be sitting here this fine afternoon, when everybody else has been going about! You don't deserve to enjoy your dinner, and I don't expect you will," she said, addressing nobody in particular, and so giving them time to find their tongues. She often sacrificed her honesty for politeness's sake.

"Sit down and be comfortable, Ernestine," spoke her betrothed, vacating his chair and offering it to her; and she noticed that he colored a little as he addressed her.

"Do, Ernestine. We have been so awfully jolly round this fire—you ought to have been here. I know you would have enjoyed yourself," said innocent Lady Dorothea, putting out an affectionate tiny hand to grasp her cousin's.

Marjorie Bruce kept the silence befitting a lowly damsel who had not been specially addressed, but the heightened rose of her cheeks confirmed Miss Lisle's suspicions that two of the trio would have felt her presence rather *de trop*.

"No, thank you Herbert; I won't sit down. I only came to get Dolly away to my room to inspect our purchases. Will you come along now, or will you

"choose some other time?" said that young lady, thinking, with a pang at her heart, how pretty her humble rival looked, how natural it was that a man like Lord Castleton should like to have her near him; and, though she was not aware of it, there was a tinge of *haineur* in the glance she bestowed upon her.

Marjorie showed herself equal to the occasion. Rising with a business-like air, she put on her hat and jacket, which she had carelessly thrown down on the table.

"It will be tea-time before I get home if I stay any longer, and my old man never likes to miss me at that hour," she said, smiling, as she equipped herself for her walk, gracefully declining Lady Dorothea's offer of assistance; then making her adieux, she went away, leaving a sort of blank in the apartment.

"Are you coming then, Dolly?" asked Miss Lisle, just a little impatiently, as Lady Dorothea, with the lover-like fondness some girls have for each other, stood at a window watching for Marjorie's egress.

Lord Castleton, once more lounging in his chair, was aware that his cousin avoided speaking to him, and, being conscious of no special culpability, felt ill-used and inclined to be sulky.

The vanished blues assailed him once more, this time with redoubled force. All the sunshine seemed to have gone off with pretty Maja, and a chilling north wind to have entered with the last comer.

"By-the-bye, Mrs. Vesey has made up her mind that we shall go some time next week," Miss Lisle informed him, with a rather wistful side glance, as, having got Lady Dorothea to move, she was leaving the room; and at the bottom of his heart he was not sorry, though he spoke the protest which good-breeding demanded.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PROPOSAL ON HORSEBACK.

A few days later there occurred an incident which startled Marjorie out of her love-dreams, and filled her mind with serious thoughts.

Chancing to see the postman approaching the farmhouse one morning, she went to meet him, and was presented with a letter addressed to herself, and bearing a London post-mark.

Ere breaking open the envelope she looked at it curiously, marveling that anybody who could not spell or write tolerably should address her, and inclined to think that there must be some mistake.

Then it flashed upon her mind that poor Lizzie Anan, who had left the neighborhood immediately after Marjorie's chance meeting with her previously recorded, was probably the writer of this very plebeian-looking missive; and, with an irrepressible little shiver of repugnance, she opened it, sauntering in an opposite direction from the house, that she might have time to read its contents ere being questioned about her correspondence.

A tear-stained, crushed, stupid epistle it was, yet there was a certain forcible, rude pathos about it which might have touched a sterner heart than my heroine's. Her humble friend of childish days, for she it was who wrote, seemed desperate, from a consciousness of having outlived her betrayer's cruel love, and of being utterly forsaken by the honest family whose name she had disgraced; and now, as a last resource, pleaded with Marjorie to use her influence over Mr. Crawford in her behalf.

Of course, she had no other than the pitiful old story to tell. He had been so kind to her when her mistress was harsh and everybody round was strange, he had seemed so fond of her, the simple, ignorant, homesick child, with nothing but her poor beauty to attract his notice, that she had learned to love him better than anything on earth; he had promised to make a lady of her, and take her as his wife to the big, grand mansion-house. She had believed it all, and trusted to his guidance, and he had led her down to those depths of shame and misery from which her pitiful cry now sounded.

He wanted her to emigrate to Australia, she wrote—"But it was not worth while—her heart was broke, and she could never hold up her head again anywhere."

All she craved for now was to see him once more. She seemed to have a feverish hope that, if he would but come face to face with her, she could move his heart to pity, and he might marry her and take her away with him abroad.

With this notion nerving her to a last effort, she made her appeal to Marjorie, telling her that she could not get him to answer her, and was forced to seek her help.

At first Marjorie resolved to refuse the pitifully urgent prayer, and advise the girl to seek advice from somebody else. Then she thought of telling the whole story to her own mother, unheeding Lizzie's earnest petition that she would not disclose the contents of her letter to anyone. Lastly, after a great deal of perturbed meditation, she made up her mind to do what was asked of her, utterly repugnant to her inclinations as was the task she meant to perform.

So with a very grave face she went home, saying not a word of her letter. Several times that forenoon her parents noticed her preoccupied, unhappy looks, and tried to find out what ailed her, but to no purpose.

She was not unpractised in keeping secrets, alas! and had contrived to blind everybody in the household as often as she had seriously thought it desirable; so she found little difficulty in baffling their inquiries.

"I think I shall go for a long ride, mamma. I have nothing to keep me at home, and the afternoon is so pleasant," she said, when their early dinner was over, and her father had gone out on his wonted farm round.

Her mother looked at her with her kind, quiet smile, and gave her approval of the proposal. All her life Marjorie had been free to ride about the neighborhood unattended.

"Come back with a bright face and your usual roses,

dear, or we'll send for the doctor," she said, touching the girl's rather pale cheek with a caressing hand, as, moved by one of her strange impulses, she flung herself on her knees beside her mother's chair, and laid her bonny head on her knee, gazing up at her with dark eyes of unfathomable sadness.

One of her black moods had taken hold of her. She had difficulty in refraining from sobbing out a confession of her general "state of sin and misery."

And Mrs. Bruce—who, along with her husband, was inclined to attribute the change that was gradually taking place in their light-hearted Maja to a hankering after the lover she had distressed them by rejecting—yearned over her with pathetically dumb affection.

"I wish there were doctors for all the troubles of this queer world, mamma. We poor mortals could keep them pretty busy," spoke the young voice, rather bitterly; and a heavy sigh ended this speech.

"What trouble would you call them in for, Maja?" asked her mother, reining from uttering a rebuke in her anxiety to discover the root of her child's discontent; and as she spoke she passed a fondling hand over the pretty, clouded face upturned to her.

Marjorie was on her guard immediately. "Laziness and restlessness, and ill-humor, mamma; these are my present afflictions," she said, brightening up at once. Then, without further delay, she ran off to get ready for her ride, leaving her mother to meditate, over her sewing, how different in their ways were the girls of this generation from those she had known in her youth.

A little later she stood at the gate watching Marjorie ride away.

The girl always looked charming on horseback. People used to turn round, to follow with admiring eyes the graceful, dark-haired damsel on the spirited chestnut mare—the beauty, *par excellence*, of that part of the country where my scene lies. And now her mother lingered in loving admiration till she had cantered out of sight.

Nobody knew the full extent of the reserved, composed woman's love for her daughter. In her heart she was a little ashamed of it, as of a folly unbecoming a busy, practical mistress of a household; and to the best of her ability she retrained from giving grounds for suspecting her of this weakness. For the present it was an uneasy love, poor soul!—the only uneasy love she had ever known. She joyed, with many misgivings, in the grace and beauty which went along with so much willfulness and restless pleasure-seeking. She was even fearful of drawing well-merited punishment upon herself for the sin of undue pride in this fair blossom of her rearing.

Vanity was a crying sin in her sober estimation, yet to her grief she felt that she was vain by proxy. Head-shakings and wise-sounding rebukes were all very well wherewith to blind other people, but that honest inner vision of hers was not so easily darkened.

The mare was fretty and curveted, as the girl was delighted to have her do, especially when anybody of interest was by to admire her and her graceful rider. The sun shone more brightly than it is wont to do at the close of the year. The few people she met on the quiet highway stared with that flattering persistency which she reckoned a species of homage by no means disagreeable; but all was of no use to-day.

Her heart was very ill at ease, her brain perplexed with doubts; and, after riding a couple of miles in the direction of Crawford Priory, she wheeled about with an unconquerable shrinking from the undertaking she had set out from home to carry through.

To ride boldly up to the Priory, and ask to see Mr. Crawford upon business; to free herself of all responsibility by appealing, in a few calmly chosen words, to what better nature there might be in him; then to leave him to reflect upon what she had been saying, while she galloped home with a lightened conscience.

Such had been her project, but her courage and nerve failed her; or, rather, her feminine, instinctive modesty prevailed over her abstract theory—that a woman might, without stepping out of her proper sphere, do battle with any form of wrong-doing.

Her mother was right, after all. This work she had contemplated was a righteous one; but it did not befit a young, ignorant girl, unable rightly to order her own life, swayed hither and thither by mere impulse.

Just as she had reached this conclusion, the very man of whom she was thinking chanced to come in sight, and the suddenness of his appearance startled her out of her wonted self-possession.

Mr. Crawford, little guessing that she had any unpleasant reason for seeking him, rode jauntily towards her, a turn of the road having hidden him until he was close at hand.

Startled, like her mistress, the mare once more indulged in a little freakishness of behavior, making the girl look her loveliest, as with slightly frowning face and firmly set mouth she exerted herself to check her, her slender figure being displayed to its fullest advantage as she did so.

A rather cross Hebe, in a perfectly fitting habit and mounted on a spirited, shapely mare, was an object of great interest to this young gentleman, and he lost no time in reining in his horse, determined that she should not pass him by with the stiff little bow which was the only salutation she seemed inclined to bestow.

"How d'ye do, Miss Bruce? Do stop a minute and speak to a fellow: it is an age since I have had the pleasure of seeing you, you know," he said, in his affected, plaintive drawl, looking at her, hat in hand, with that offensive, admiring stare she disliked so much.

Marjorie was cross and hot, and in a mood for quarreling; and his lover-like airs provoked her into forgetfulness of her resolution to hold no converse with a man of such ignoble life.

"I wanted to see you this afternoon, and rode out on purpose. I have only a very few words to say to you,"

she proclaimed, drawing up and casting a quick glance of ill-suppressed scorn at him.

He had an idea of what was coming, though he laughed feebly and tried to look unconcerned.

"I feel honored, I do assure you, Miss Bruce. I dared not flatter myself you had a spark of interest in me, upon my honor," protested he, with a deprecating smile; and his Hebe flashed a look of unmitigated contempt at him.

"I have not the slightest spark of interest in you, sir," she said, in a voice that quivered with anger. "I have a very great deal in the poor girl I saw last in your company. It is for her sake, and in compliance with her heart-broken prayers, that I expose myself to your insults now."

Though a good deal frightened, Mr. Crawford could admire the spirit of the speaker. To his *blase*, languid soul there was a novel charm in having a *rencontre* of this sort with a fair woman of ridiculously ardent temperament—an innocent creature, too, spite of her startlingly *outré* conduct in thus meddling with a matter which was quite out of a young lady's line. He must make his peace with her, and dawdle over his love-making no longer. No doubt, she, a plain farmer's daughter, had never seriously thought him capable of such a romantic folly as marrying her; indeed he was astonished at himself.

He—a knowing man of the world, who might have chosen a wife from the very flower of London society—about to fling himself away in this unheard-of, sentimental fashion. The idea was perfectly preposterous. But there sat the pretty, frowning Amazon who had him in her toils, and he could not help himself.

"Miss Bruce," he said, in the most penitent of tones, wheeling round his horse and placing himself alongside of her, "there is nothing in life I would not do to please you. Why are you so hard on a poor fellow? You accuse me of insulting you. By Jove!" (he spoke with gathering warmth), "I would shoot any fellow alive that dared to speak an impertinent word to you!"

He drew himself up in his saddle, and looked as heroic as such a worn-out, pale-faced dandy could look. As had many a time happened before, the girl's anger evaporated in an overpowering sense of the ludicrous. Besides, unless she chanced to meet with a brave opponent, she could never keep up the proper battle spirit long.

"I am going home, and I am going by myself," she said, with a peremptory little nod of dismissal, and looking as angry as she was able to do. She was about to give the clamping mare her head and be off like the wind, when Mr. Crawford stopped her with an urgent entreaty for another moment's delay.

"You'll allow me to ride along with you, just till I have made my peace. Come now, there's a good girl," he went on, as she paused and looked at him. "Upon my word, I am not such a bad fellow as you take me for, Miss Bruce. I mean nothing but what is honorable now, I do assure you. Why are you so afraid to have me speak to you nowadays?"

"You shall not ride with me a single step, but you can say what you have got to say now: I can wait a minute," answered Marjorie, majestically passing over his accusation. She *raided*, indeed; and of such an utterly insignificant little rake as that! And she threw up her pretty head with a charming toss.

And then an idea flashed upon her, making her suddenly change her manner. Maybe she was judging him too harshly, after all. Nobody was altogether bad, and he might be seriously intending to reform his life, and make what reparation he could to that unfortunate girl—how else could he behave in anything approaching an honorable way? thought she in her unsophisticated innocence—the quality which prompted many a mistaken act of her girlhood.

"I beg your pardon; I have no right whatever to judge you, Mr. Crawford. I do not doubt that you are sincere in speaking as you do," she said, fixing sweetly grave, dark eyes on him and speaking in a low voice of unwonted gentleness.

The spark of goodness which, God be thanked, dwells, I believe, in every human soul—sure in this life or in the next to be fanned into a wonderful refining flame, which will consume all the pitiful grossness of its nature—was stirred by the girl's next words, even more softly uttered.

"We can only be sorry when we do wrong and try to begin all over again. I know that," she said, in a simple, earnest way that was very becoming; and then giving him a quiet gesture of permission to accompany her, she slackened the reins, and the two rode slowly on together, the young man for once at least repentant of his by-gone sin, and feebly willing to amend it if there might be found some easy method of doing so. Marrying this prettiest of preachers would be the first step towards reformation; the rest would no doubt follow naturally, he meditated in a fit of rare self-communion.

"I wish I could begin all over again, Miss Bruce," he said, with a rueful look at her. "I'd keep on the square better than I've done; but, by Jove! when a fellow is left alone in a gloomy old place like the Priory, it isn't easy to keep out of mischief. I've been too much there this long time back."

"And why did you stay, then?" asked Marjorie, turning round to him with an air of not unkindly interest. Mr. Crawford's pale face flushed.

"I stayed because I could see you pretty often. You remember that first day I met you in the woods yonder with the Castleton people; well, I fell head over ears in love with you—there's no use making a long story of it. I've hung about ever since, and didn't care a bit, and, after all, have scarce got a kind smile from you."

Marjorie bent a crimsoning, indignant face over the mare's glossy head, and her heart gave a throb of passionate pain, anger and shame and self-reproach making

ing a dire tumult of unhappy emotions within her girlish heart.

"How dare you speak so to me!" she said, with a quivering voice, when after a few moments she found herself able to speak; and her beautiful dark eyes were turned upon her companion with a flashing light, such as he had never seen in them before.

Now, Mr. Crawford felt not the slightest difficulty in accounting for this repulse, by the fact that he had, with an utterly despicable reluctance to commit himself, stopped short of a direct offer of marriage, and accordingly believed that it lay within his power to put a speedy stop to the fair damsel's tantrums.

What a charming little fire-eating creature she was when her spirit was up! Who would have thought that this was the gentle, dove-like maiden of a few minutes ago? A shrewd, wide-awake young minx, too, with a wonderful knack of bringing a poor fellow up to the scratch. No wonder he was ready to make fearful sacrifices for her sake.

He would take the plunge now while his blood was up, and ride home an engaged man.

"One minute, Miss Bruce," he said, excitedly, as she was about to cut the hateful interview short by setting off at a gallop. "You do not understand me; I am not flirting a bit. I never was more serious in my life. I want you to marry me, and I'll never know an hour's happiness till you are my wife. There, now, I have made it all plain enough, haven't I?" and he ended with a nervous little laugh.

"You have made it all too plain, sir!" said Marjorie, reining up her mare with a sudden jerk, which set her rearing in rather an alarming manner, and compelled her mistress to make another exhibition of her equestrian skill.

"You know that I am aware of your shameful betrayal of an innocent girl, and you coolly ask me to marry you. You make it very plain that you think me quite on your own level, and I have never given you cause to insult me in this way. Never, though I have been foolish and frivolous enough, God knows!" she added, with a long-drawn sigh and a suspicion of suppressed sobbing in her voice.

Mr. Crawford, who had followed her example in drawing up his horse, stared at her in mute amazement. Of course, she was only jealous, but even jealousy could not excuse language so appalling. Still he made an effort to bring her to her senses.

"Miss Bruce," he said, with a good deal of offended dignity, "you distress me cruelly. Do not rake up that wretched affair. I mean to provide for that girl, and get her out of the country; settle her respectably in life, in fact. With such matters young ladies should never meddle. Let us drop that subject."

Marjorie threw a keen, scornful look at him, but with difficulty forced herself to speak calmly. Though hopeless of success now, she would yet go through her hated part.

"Your conscience must tell you that you ought to marry her. She loves you in spite of the misery you have brought on her; she was a good girl till she knew you; surely you will make this reparation. She entreated me to plead for her, and I have not the heart to leave you without doing so. Go to her as she craves for you to do; treat her with the mercy you hope God will show you; you will not repent that when you come to die."

There was nothing too improbable to come to pass now. He, Hugh Crawford, of the Priory, rejected by a farmer's daughter, and gravely told to marry a miserable little nurse-girl who had cost him no end of annoyance already! The earth might have opened beneath his horse's feet, and he would scarce have been surprised.

"Take time and think over it all, Miss Bruce. Excuse me telling you that there is scarce a girl in the county wouldn't say yes pretty quick if I asked her to marry me," he managed to utter forth after a few moments' silence, during which Marjorie looked at him in impatient expectation of some decisive reply. "I shall call on your father to-morrow and ask your hand properly. I want to do everything that is handsome by you, settlements and that sort of thing. You'd have your establishment in London, and I'd manage to get you into the first society, and be proud of you, by Jove!" he went on, with gathering animation.

Marjorie's temper was roused once more.

"When I marry I shall marry some one I can respect and love," she said, hotly; adding, after a momentary pause, "I must beg of you not to come to my home upon such an errand; there is no need that my parents should be annoyed with this matter. I tell you once for all, that there is not an honest ploughman in the country I would not gratefully marry to escape the torture of becoming your wife, if I had no alternative but to marry somebody. I have no more to say to you, and am going home. Let our acquaintanceship end here," she added, with hopelessly firm air; then, while the astounded gentleman gazed at her amazedly, she galloped off, leaving him to wheel about and ride homeward in a fury of rage and disappointment.

He was still in this savage mood, when, a quarter of an hour later, the Torwood House carriage appeared in the distance. Recognizing it as it drew nearer, a vicious expression dawned on his ill-humored face.

Here came the people who had by their ridiculous independence of the ordinary usages of society led him into this pitfall.

What right had they to lift a humble country girl out of her proper rank, and bring her into familiar association with them and their friends, regardless of the consequences?

They had kindled the fire in which he had burned his foolish fingers; and he did not feel sure that they had not done so intentionally.

No doubt they would have been delighted to see their protégée settle down as Mrs. Crawford of the Priory, now that Lord Castleton could not safely amuse himself with making love to her much longer.

The little fool's prudery and sentimental love for that coolest of triflers had spoiled the plot, but he owed them a grudge all the same.

Thus fuming, he came riding towards the carriage wherein sat Mrs. Vesey, Miss Lisle and the earl, in happy unconsciousness of his having the slightest cause for entertaining any ill-feeling to them.

The carriage was an open one, and Mr. Crawford was hailed by Mrs. Vesey with a highly gracious pantomimic invitation to draw up.

"Do stop the coachman for an instant, Lord Castleton; I want to tell Mr. Crawford to come and say good-bye," she said, with a blandly beseeching air; and the gentleman, looking rather cross, did as he was desired.

All Mr. Crawford's doings were not known at Torwood House—where the family, along with their other peculiarities, showed a great indifference to gossip about their neighbors—yet they had of late heard enough to make them rather shy of associating with him.

Mrs. Vesey, however, was too much a woman of the world to be very particular about the morality of her young male acquaintances who were favorites of fortune.

"It is very sad indeed," she would say, with a plaintive sigh, when she chanced to hear some discreditable story told of this interesting class; "but we hope for a reformation. Young men will be young men, alas!" and she would end with that sorely abused quotation about charity and a multitude of sins, and look mild reproach at any heathenish stickler for a plainer criterion of right and wrong.

Now she smiled on this long-descended, wealthy young gentleman with the innocent, confiding friendliness of one whose eyes had never been opened to his vices, while he sullenly saluted the trio in the carriage, looking so decidedly ill-tempered that even careless Lord Castleton's attention was aroused.

"How do you do, Mr. Crawford? I could not let you ride past us without telling you that Miss Lisle and I are really going off the end of this week. Be sure to come up and say farewell, or I shall be very angry," spoke Mrs. Vesey, wondering what on earth was the matter with the wonted gay cavalier.

"Thanks," said the gentleman addressed, with a low bow. Then, quite carried away by passionate desire to avenge himself in some little measure for the mortification he had been undergoing, he turned with a downright insulting air to Lord Castleton, now staring at him with a half-quizzical, half-bored air.

"I have just been riding with Miss Bruce, that particular friend of yours, Lord Castleton. Ought I not to feel a happy man?" he said, with an unpleasant laugh.

There was no possibility of mistaking his desire to be offensive. Lord Castleton's handsome face flushed with contemptuous anger, and he made a most imprudent retort.

"You are a more miserable puppy than I took you to be, and that is saying a great deal," he said, scornfully, darting a frowning look at the sneering foe, who was by no means prepared for so furious a speech. "Drive on quickly," he added, addressing the coachman, who, along with his couple of fellow-servants, had mightily enjoyed this quite unprecedented little row, though preserving countenances of stern immobility; and in an instant the carriages flew on.

The two ladies were agitated and embarrassed, and did not break the awkward silence which followed Lord Castleton's furious retort.

Mrs. Vesey, who was an arrant coward, was terribly afraid that his irate lordship might turn upon her, and sat with downcast eyes and disturbed expression, while Miss Lisle tried hard to maintain her usual composure of look.

"I am sorry that you should be annoyed in this way, Nessie," Lord Castleton said, when the silence had lasted long enough to be extremely oppressive; and he glanced across at his cousin with a deprecatory smile, coolly ignoring Mrs. Vesey, whom he considered in a great measure the cause of the contretemps.

Miss Lisle returned his look with one of great gravity.

"Thank you, Herbert," she answered, a little coldly, but with perfect gentleness; and, discouraged by the brevity of this reply, he made no further attempt at conversation, but sat tugging impatiently at his mustache in sulky meditation until the carriage drew up in front of the mansion.

Mrs. Vesey, going to her niece's room a little after, eager to talk over the adventure, found that young lady provokingly unapproachable on the subject.

"We'll speak of something else, if you please, Aunt Vesey," she said, in her gentle, determined way; and there was nothing for it but to give in.

And they all met at dinner and made themselves agreeable to each other, as in duty bound. Several gentlemen were staying at the house, and Lord Castleton found it easy to evade any private talk with his betrothed during the remainder of that day. On the morrow he was determined to convince her of the injustice of Mr. Crawford's implied accusation: nor did he fail to do so.

CHAPTER XV.

JOHN BRUCE LOSES HIS TEMPER.

"THERE is something the matter with my lassie. Why can't she tell her old dad all about it?" said Mr. Bruce, gently, softly stroking his daughter's hair.

It was the morning after her exciting day. Breakfast was over, her mother had betaken herself to her wonted active forenoon duties, and they had the cosy, quiet parlor to themselves.

"Stay beside me, papa. I'm so tired," Marjorie had said, with one of her now familiar wistful looks; and he had stayed, sadly puzzling over his little maid's changed ways.

"You won't mind if I don't speak: my head aches," she had gone on, drawing a stool to his side, and resting her head on his knee. Then, when she found that he was content to give her her own way of being comfortable, she had closed her eyes restfully, and there had been a long silence, during which the old man's eyes had marked with dismay how colorless and worn-out she looked—what a subdued sorrowfulness was in her air.

She was thinking; she had been thinking all night long—she who had been wont to sleep as soundly as a child; and her heart and brain alike ached wearily.

At last there had come to her a clear perception of the wrong she had been doing all these months past, and she had taken herself to task with no lack of stern earnestness.

No wonder if Mr. Crawford thought light of her. He had seen her encourage the attentions of a man completely out of her sphere, and found in honor to fulfil his engagement with another.

She had been justly punished by that insulting offer which in all probability he would shame her by repeating to her father, who had a hearty contempt for him and the stock he came of. Rejected, he would be likely to say dreadfully compromising things of her and Lord Castleton—things which the gossip-loving neighborhood would readily believe.

She must drop the congenial society of the Castleton family, sternly crush that daily growing love which had taken such firm root in her foolish heart, and be content with the dull, colorless life of a woman who has no absorbing duties, no exciting pleasures.

Yet she had known all along that her glorious, butterfly existence could not last, so she ought not to feel so suddenly despondent now.

Dreadfully musing thus, her father's tender question fell on her ear, awakening a strong inclination to tell him everything that troubled her, and be soothed and petted like an unhappy child.

But pride came to her aid, as it had come the day before when her heart had been so near opening itself to her mother's waiting sympathy, and she answered, with an attempt at a smile:

"Nothing worse than a fit of 'the blues,' papa. There, have I not trusted you with the mighty secret? Scold me well, for I deserve it if ever a girl did."

Mr. Bruce was doubtful whether she was not keeping back something, and looked at her thoughtfully.

"My little lassie never used to have 'the blues,'" he said.

"Ah, but she is growing old and wise now, you see, and she can't be just so happy as she used to."

"Then I wish she would stay young and foolish, Maja bairn."

He sighed as he spoke, and Marjorie's heart smote her.

"I doubt there's a love-affair at the bottom of all this, eh, dear?" he went on; and the girl's pale face flushed suspiciously. "You sent one off that you'd like to whistle back now, Beauty, is that it? Tell old dad, and he'll put everything straight."

"You are all at sea, papa. If I wanted him, I'd soon ask you to whistle—you're the best whistler I know. I heard you at 'Bonnie Charlie's' noo awa' under my window early this morning when I was lazily lying in bed."

He saw that she was trying to direct his attention from herself, and, being really eager to gain some certain knowledge of her state of mind, he would not thus be led away from the subject in hand.

"Who do you like better than John Alton, eh, Beauty?"

Marjorie felt that they were coming to close quarters now, and her heart began to beat quickly. She forced a little laugh, and looked up at him with as innocent an air as she could assume.

"You, to be sure, old dad," she said; but she could not look him steadily in the face, and his often-aroused, often allayed suspicions of her having conceived an attachment for Lord Castleton rushed upon him with almost overpowering conviction.

He was angry—not with her, poor child! but with the gentleman—the family of Torwood House—her mother—himself—the whole strange combination of circumstances that had led to his one fondly cherished darling falling into this snare, and his anger found vent in passionate speech.

"I wish I had shut my door in Lord Castleton's face the first time he came here, with his condescending good looks and taking ways. I might have known he would bring trouble and care to us, sooner or later. Couldn't he find women enough to divert him in his own rank, without coming here to turn your silly head?"

His own hot blood boiled in the girl's veins now. She rose quickly and stood before him, with her pretty head proudly raised and her eyes flashing, an indignant flush mantling her face.

"Papa," she said, with a queenly air. "I have not given you any cause to insult me!" And her bosom heaved with a suppressed sob.

He was sure, from her vehemence of indignation, that he had struck the right chord at last.

"Let us say no more about it, Maja," he answered her, calming down into rueful thoughtfulness. "I never meant to blame you, bairn;" and, rising, he drew her to him and kissed her, saying, fondly, "My one ewe lamb, my precious little lass!"

She suffered his caress, but that was all; her womanly pride was up in arms, and she could not easily forgive him. More than ever was she determined to make a radical change in her mode of life, whatever the doing so might cost her.

Then, moved by the troubled look on the dear old face, she took his hand, and looked up at him with eyes from which the angry light had quite faded.

"Oh, papa," she said, "never let us two quarrel! What should I do if a day came that you did not love me?"

What a changeable, incomprehensible being she was! How she startled one with her queer, impulsive speeches!

"That day is very far off, little lass," her father said, putting his arm round her, and looking into her upturned face with a half-sad, half-humorous smile.

"And you won't ever quarrel with me?"

"Not without very good cause, my little daughter."

"What do you call good cause, papa?" Marjorie asked, an undertone of fear in her voice. She was thinking of the possibility of any exaggerated rumors of her past foolish doings reaching his ears.

He looked at her uneasily, wondering why she questioned him thus.

Could there have been any positive love-making on Lord Castleton's part, and had she demeaned herself by allowing it? But no, he would not mistrust his simple little lass, staring wistfully into his face with those beautiful soft dark eyes.

"Such cause as you would never give me," he said, looking at her with fond pride. "We have never had any but good women in our family, so far as ever I hear; and there have been more Bruces of Bruce Hall than there have been Earls of Castleton, mind you that."

"I do not know what you mean. I wish you would not speak so to me. I am not accustomed to it, and I do not mean to get accustomed to it, papa," spoke Marjorie, a bitter pang of mingled anger and self-reproach driving the color from her clouded face, and leaving it very white and stern.

Would they never cease to ring the changes on that hateful note of warning which old Bell had been the first to sound? Had she really shown herself so thoughtlessly incapable of guarding her own womanly dignity, that nobody, not even her fond, indulgent father, would trust her any more?

In that one draught of humiliation the naturally proud girl did penance for the pleasant follies of months, and reckoned them dearly purchased.

Her father was not displeased that she resented his words. She was her mother's own daughter, after all, and he need not be afraid to trust her entirely.

"You speak as if Lord Castleton was a villain and I was a fool, papa," Marjorie said, still nursing her wrath; and her father answered, quite gently:

"Never mind how I speak, Maja. I think no harm of him or you; if anybody is to blame, it's myself."

"But there is nobody to blame, for there is no harm done, papa," interrupted she, well aware by the pain at her poor little heart that she was speaking nonsense; and she forced a smile to her quivering lips.

"Then we'll say no more about it, you fiery little woman," responded the old man, with another kiss; but he was fully determined to stop Lord Castleton's intimacy with her, and very soon found an opportunity of doing so.

That same morning Marjorie astonished her mother with the whole story of the preceding day's doings, giving her permission to tell her father as much as she thought it right to do.

She was tired, disheartened, indifferent to praise or blame just then; it was a relief to unburden her mind of a troublesome secret. Besides, if anybody could be expected to have an interest in Lizzie Annan's fate, it was that good, wise mother, whom she had never known to murmur under any amount of care-bearing for other people.

Mrs. Bruce was more vexed than she was willing to show. Marjorie's confidences came too late to be welcome, yet she feared to speak with displeasure, lest the spoiled girl should be discouraged from trusting her next time she was in a difficulty. So in that irrepresible honesty which was part of her nature, she was a little cold in her manner, just when it was highly desirable that she should be the very reverse; and though she promised to do all that could be done for the unfortunate girl who was the chief cause of this annoyance, and spared her daughter the rebuke she had fully expected, that exacting damsel left her, feeling dubious whether it might not have been better to seek a more sympathetic confidante, or even to go on managing her own affairs as she had been trying to do of late, without asking anybody's advice.

"I have written to Lizzie Annan, and sent her money to come home to her mother's. The poor body is willing to take her back until we see what can be done to get her into the way of making her bread honestly," Mrs. Bruce announced, coming into the drawing-room late that afternoon.

She had her bonnet on, having just returned from a visit to widow Annan's. She looked calm and even cheerful, in a grave way; her cheeks were becomingly flushed with the exercise of her long walk on this frosty afternoon. Her eyes shone with their accustomed light of thoughtful serenity, and Marjorie, idly sitting in front of the fire, her hands lying listlessly in her lap, her graceful head drooped on her bosom, lifted up a weary-looking, sad, white face, and gazed with a sort of envious admiration at the tall, stately blonde woman.

"How nice you look, mamma!" she said, in her queer, irrelevant fashion, stretching out a lazy little hand to her without rising from her easy-chair; and her eyes were upturned somewhat wistfully.

Indeed Mrs. Bruce, in her dark silk and handsome furs—she was as dainty as Marjorie in her style of dressing—was a very handsome woman, and looked every inch a lady besides.

"You might be a duchess, mamma," went on her daughter, staring still, as, coming up, she took her offered hand and smiled upon her.

So they made up their little morning difference very quickly, after all. Maja never could keep up her grumblings long, and her mother was never slow to forgive any of her follies when she turned to her with the affectionate look that was on her bonny face now.

"No wonder you have headaches, you silly girl," she said, looking the fond things which it was not her na-

ture to speak out, "sitting moping here over a fire, with nobody to speak to and nothing to do. I must look better after you to-morrow."

Miss Marjorie pursued her own train of thought, quite undisturbed by this remark.

"I wonder what sort of a young girl you were, mamma. Did you ever feel awfully happy sometimes, and awfully tired of living at other times? Did you do foolish things and fret over them afterward? Were you ever the least little bit like me?"

Ah, me! how little we know each other! What sharp stabs we may give quite unintentionally! The girl had given one now, and was quite struck to see her mother's face grow suddenly overshadowed by some pang of recollection. She could think of no other cause for its change of expression.

Like most other women, Mrs. Bruce had had her little bit of romance in her early girlhood. Staid wife and mother as she was, she could not look back to it without emotion. Out of the mists of the far-away years rose a vision of herself as a simple, trusting girl of eighteen, listening with rapturous heart-throbbing to the wooing of a handsome young soldier-lover, who had chanced to find his way to the quiet manse, her father and his having been dear friends in their youth.

He had stayed there a few supremely blessed summer weeks; then, his regiment sailing for India, he had gone off, leaving her, with her father's consent, under an engagement to marry him on his return in a few years. Soon after landing he had died of fever, and the first news that reached her after that of his sailing was the news of his death.

Marjorie had never heard the sad little story, which was known to very few in the neighborhood. They were quiet, proud people at the manse, not given to proclaiming their joys and sorrows. The minister's young daughter kept her thoughts to herself, and went about her multitudinous duties with unflinching bravery; and as time went on her young heart recovered slowly, surely, as most young hearts do, when kind fate denies them the often-coveted luxury of leisure to indulge their grief.

It was a perfectly serene, healthily hopeful heart when John Bruce came begging for it some years later. It had known no very acute pangs in all the long married life that had followed; yet even now it could throb with half sad, half sweet emotion, when memory recalled that worshiping boyish lover—the only real lover she had ever known.

If, as most women would have done, she had confided the whole story to this one dearly loved daughter, there might have been a wonderfully strong bond of sympathy established. As it was, the girl believed her far too rational and practical now ever to have known the raptures and griefs of that thrilling emotional life which had of late been hers, and consequently she was disinclined to be confidential. Mrs. Bruce's discomposure was only momentary. She smiled and shook her head.

"No, I don't think I was the least like you, Maja," she said; "but girls will be girls to the world's end. I dare say I had not very much sense then."

"I can't believe it," responded Marjorie, with a sigh and a rather impatient movement in her chair.

"And I had my troubles, of course, my dear—nobody escapes them."

Her troubles! No doubt she had had little natural vexations and disappointments which come to everybody; but a sore heart-ache like that going on within her now—a terrible tiredness of life while she was only on the first stage of its journey—she never could have known.

Marjorie lay back among her cushions and stared into the fire, relapsing into dreamy silence.

Her mother made a careful study of the pale, discontented face, and, having already heard her husband's account of his morning interview with her, came to the conclusion that it was indeed high time to interfere. She resolved to give her approval to his idea of going boldly to Torwood House, and requesting his lordship to cease visits and attentions which might eventually be compromising to their girl.

Already a whisper or two of ill-natured gossip had reached them. Lord Castleton, who was merely thoughtless, would readily understand the necessity for their taking this step. In the meantime they would not seek to prevent Marjorie from continuing her visits to Lady Dorothea, should the two girls insist on maintaining their intimacy, unwise as it certainly was. Spring would carry all the Castleton family away to enjoy the London season, and a break would thus happen naturally.

Surely no irreparable mischief had been done yet. With Lord Castleton's marriage a great change would take place in the arrangements of Torwood House.

The new Lady Castleton would not be likely to choose friends out of her own rank, and Marjorie would perhaps learn to content herself within their own proper middle-class sphere, which most certainly they ought never to have allowed her to desert even for brief periods.

"I wish I saw her safe settled down with a good man, wife," Mr. Bruce sighed, when they had in secret conclave talked all this over.

"I wish you would ask John Alton to come and see us now and then, father. Neighbors ought to be friendly," responded his wife, with a wise little smile; and the old man caught at the hope thus suggested with an alacrity which showed how great had been his previous downheartedness.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MORNING OF THE HUNT BALL.

LET me chronicle in a few sentences the events of the next few weeks, and take up my story again at the date by which Marjorie had long been making her computations of time—that of the Hunt Ball.

Lord Castleton and the two ladies left Torwood

House on the next day after the scenes last recorded, and Mr. Crawford, of the Priory, disgusted with a neighborhood in which he had experienced hitherto undreamed-of humiliations, took his departure for Paris, where in exhausting dissipation he intended to banish the recollection of his sentimental folly.

Lizzie Annan, thanks to Mrs. Bruce's exertions, was persuaded to accompany a respectable cottar's family to Canada, where they were about to settle on a small farm, and would gladly give her a home in return for her services. Lady Castleton, living in perfect retirement at Torwood, was hard at work on a novel which would appear early in the spring.

Lady Dorothea and Marjorie Bruce were almost inseparable, and consequently life at the farm-house went on more dully than it would have done had the latter assumed her proper place in it.

There had been famous hunting weather that year, and while it lasted, old Mr. Bruce, accompanied by his pretty daughter, had scandalized the soberer part of the farming folk by regularly turning out to the meet—as hale and hearty a well-mounted old Nimrod as the county could boast.

Many times during the last month Marjorie had prevailed on John Alton to indulge himself in a day with the hounds, and on each occasion had found him a very attentive cavalier, from which fact you may infer that his rejection as a wooer had not had the effect of curing him of his attachment.

For some weeks after his disappointment he had, indeed, wisely avoided the girl's distracting society, but, meeting her by accident when walking in the neighborhood of her home, she had drawn him within her toils once more. A little sigh, a becoming blush, a glance of mingled penitence and entreaty from a pair of quickly lowered, beautiful eyes, and he forgot everything but how kind and fair she was. A low-spoken, pretty speech, and she had bound him to her forever.

"I am not to lose my friend, am I?" that was all; but the tone in which she said this, the appealing look which she bent upon him, carried her words straight to his honest heart, and there awoke a vehement protest of unquenched love and longing to protect and cherish.

Yes, he would be her faithful friend. If fate had indeed decreed that he might be no more, he was man enough to bear that sore heart-ache without distressing her by an exhibition of suffering, and would come back to his abandoned post as her special friend and confidant of the male sex.

So the two renewed the familiar intercourse his love-making had interrupted, and passed many a pleasant evening together within that most home-like of dwellings, Torwood Farm, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce congratulating themselves on the turn affairs had taken, and indulging in fond hopes that, after all, they had exaggerated their causes of misgiving to their child's future happiness.

And now let us seek out Marjorie on this the morning of the day on which is to come off that eagerly looked-forward-to event in her life, the Hunt Ball.

She has been passing the night at Torwood House, and is making an unexpected appearance at the door of the farm-house parlor, where her father and mother are seated at breakfast.

The air is clear and cold, the sky almost cloudless, and the brightest of winter sunshine floods the room, making it look its cheeriest. A glowing fire casts a warm, red light about the daintily spread table drawn near it. A singing kettle on the hob; a wildly merry canary, trilling in its cage, hung in the sunniest window; a fragrant steam rising from the old-fashioned silver coffee-pot; a purring, black cat luxuriously curled up on the rug; glimpses, through the fast-dissolving frosted pictures on the window-panes, of the peaceful farm-yard where old Bell is feeding the poultry—such are the adjuncts which, surrounding those two dear, familiar faces, strike the girl as wonderfully attractive.

She sees only what she has seen scores of times before; but to-day, fresh from a morning walk, rosy and happy, and inclined to be in love with almost everything in life, her young heart beats with lively appreciation of her home blessings.

"Oh, papa, it is so good to be alive!" she says, getting behind his chair and kissing him, when they have done exclaiming about her sudden entry at so early an hour. "Oh, mamma, I am almost too happy this morning!" running over to that smiling lady and kissing her too.

"Sit down and have your breakfast, Maja. Who would have thought of you running off here before your grand folks were out of bed! I'm sure they'll think you very rude," said the matron, looking up at her with fond eyes.

Maja took off her hat and gloves and deposited them hastily on a side-table, then drew her chair close to her father's elbow.

"I shall be back there before Lady Dorothea is dressed; she is the laziest of young ladies, and the countess breakfasts alone just now. Nobody will miss me," she explained, and then dashed into her plans for the day.

"I wish you would stay at home and rest for the evening, Beauty. I want you to be a credit to your old dad," her father interposed, laughingly.

"Do, there's a good girl!" Mrs. Bruce chimed in. "I can't rest, I'm so happy!" the girl answered, smiling in such a bright way that one could not but believe; "but all the same I mean to be a credit to you, old man."

Then, with a little laugh and toss of her bonny head, she added, as if prompted by an impulse of uncontrollable honesty: "Don't think me very wicked, papa and mamma, but I have set my heart on being the belle of the ball. There now, the murder is out."

"Oh, Marjorie!" her mother began; but her intended rebuke was cut short there, for her daughter interrupted her with good-humored brusquerie:

"I know all you are going to say, dear mamma, and I agree with every word of it; only it is no use. I can't help it, but I feel as if I fancy a war-horse does when he hears the sound of the trumpet calling to the battle. I am out of myself, and until this ball is over nobody must meddle with me. Don't be afraid but I shall behave with perfect decorum, only I must be the belle of the ball."

"Bravo, Beauty! Let her alone, Mary; what's the harm of a little vanity? Some folks have bigger faults, I warrant," spoke the indulgent old father, turning from one woman to the other.

Of course she would be the belle of the ball; none of the young ladies of the county families could hold a candle to her: why should she be ashamed to say out what everybody knew was quite true? and he added, enthusiastically, "Hurrah for the bonniest lassie in the country side, and a favored lover to her before she is a year older!"

"Amen!" said Marjorie, pushing away her almost untasted breakfast, and tying on her hat again by way of covering those troublesome blushes.

Such a slim, erect, lovely maiden she was just at that moment! her cheeks and eyes alight with joyous excitement—a smile hovering about her mouth and bringing out the sweetest of dimples—her restless little hands fidgeting with the large black cross that hung at her side, according to a fashion of the day.

Such a self-engrossed, pleasure-craving, earth-bound heathen, too! her mother added, in her thoughts, heaving a heart-felt sigh, and looking away from the sad, solemn emblem which had caught her eye and suggested this after-thought.

"I wish you would not wear that, dear. Playthings should be shaped in some other form, it seems to me," she said, in a low voice, laying a gentle hand on Maja's arm, and looking into her face with a rather wistful air, which for the moment sobered the girl's spirits.

The cross, emblem of sublime self-sacrifice, divine abnegation of material joys, what had she to do with it? What meaning had it for her, whose heart throbbed with utterly selfish hopes and passions, and shrunk with unutterable terror from the very idea of ever being called upon to resign its earthly vanities, to fill its life with the cares and joys of others by a god-like sympathy, hard even to imagine?

"Here, mamma, take it from me; I do not want it. It frightens me, and I mean to be happy this one day more, though the world should be coming to an end to-morrow," Marjorie said, with a slight shiver, unfastening the chain which bound the cross to her girdle; and there was an undefinable, defiant sadness in her tone and look, though she laughed when, struck by this, her mother anxiously inquired whether anything troubled her.

"You are troubling her, Mary: let the lassie be. Why shouldn't she wear what pleases her?" the old man interposed rather testily, startling them both, for they had fancied him unobservant of their colloquy.

Marjorie ran over to him, and, dropping on her knees by his chair, slipped a hand within his, and looked up into his face.

"My old man! my foolish, kind old man!" she whispered, in her caressing way; and once more a pang of jealous yearning pierced her mother's faithful heart.

"You are wrong, and mamma is right all the same, though," the girl went on, turning her wonderful eyes on her mother with a glance which made amends for her previous offenses. "To-morrow I mean to begin growing like her—to-morrow, remember."

"Hush!" said her father, gently laying his hand on hers, and patting it with tenderness too deep for words; "a wiser than you or me, little lass, wrote, 'Boast not thyself of the morrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth;'" and he sighed, oppressed by one of those grave misgivings which occasionally took hold of him when Maja was specially bent on enjoying herself without regard to future consequences.

"Oh dear!" sighed the young lady, plaintively, rising to her feet, and looking appealingly from the one parent to the other; "and this is my first ball, and I have been living on it for months. Why will you persist in trying to frighten me?"

What if she had been building her hopes on a foundation of sand, and the morrow should find her sitting desolate amidst their ruins! Was it not within the range of possibility that Lord Castleton should fail to come, or, coming, should fail to claim her waiting love? In all these weeks, during which Miss Lisle had been constantly near him, and she so far away, might not that by-gone outburst of tenderness have been bitterly repented of?

But then why should he not have excused himself from attending this ball, at which he was certain to meet her? Why should he be leaving his betrothed to come to Torwood just now? She was sure she knew the reason, and her heart leaped up again the more obstinately gay because of this momentary depression.

"We have treated our lassie very badly, mother," Mr. Bruce said, watching her, as, busy with the foregoing thoughts, she stood by his chair drawing on her gloves; and Mrs. Bruce smiled and shook her head, her eyes also on the fair young face, which at once assumed its brightest look.

"Never mind, I forgive you this time," Maja laughed; "but now I must be off. We are going to skate on the loch immediately after Lady Dorothea has got her breakfast, so I'll likely see you again this forenoon, old dad; I know you'll be among the curlers."

"Ay, that I will, Beauty; and somebody else you like better than the auld man means to be there, let me tell you."

"Who is that?" asked Marjorie, arching her eyebrows, and looking as if she was at a loss.

"Guess, Maja," her mother interposed, bringing all her powers of observation to bear on this puzzling damsel.

"John Alton, of course," and she neither blushed nor

dropped her smiling eyes, but only nodded with an air of graceful assurance.

"And you like him better than me, Maja?" quoth her father, a little ruefully, stroking the little hand she had laid in his broad palm, and staring up at her.

"Oh, of course. Why, he is a young man, and an unmarried young man—how can I help it?" she laughed.

"Why are mamma and you so anxious to get rid of me?" she added, regarding them both with a comical, sidelong glance, which yet was a little wistful.

"Ah, dear, you know better. The sun may stop shining the day you leave the old man for good and all, and he'll never find it out. Isn't that true, Mary?" Mr. Bruce said, with infinite pathos of look and tone; and Mrs. Bruce added a quiet protest in her gentlest manner.

Of course they would miss her, and she them, the dear old folk, who had once sufficed to fill that restless, quick-beating heart of hers; only she would cling very fondly to them all the days of her life, and pay them long arrears of respect and filial duty, though she were twenty times a countess. Yes, and if her anticipated cup of intoxicating joy were dashed from her lips, she would bear it quietly. She would let nobody know, but, coming back to the dear father and mother, would pour out for them alone in a life-long offering all the devotion of which her nature was capable, all the love that was left in her sore heart—that would be the cross which she would wear; and she glanced with a sigh at the rejected ornament, now lying in her mother's work-basket, above a heap of flannels meant for the aged cottar-folk of the neighborhood.

Only she must have to-day to herself, just this one more bright, exciting day, whatever the future might bring.

She left home gayly as she had entered it, and was soon back to the luxurious, distracting influences of Torwood House.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY CASTLETON'S RUBIES.

"HER ladyship is at breakfast in the morning-room," Marjorie was told by the servant whom she encountered in the passage leading to that apartment; and neither she hastened when she had taken off her walking things.

The door was ajar, and, pushing it softly open, she entered, unnoticed by her friend, and pausing a moment to amuse herself by a look at this interior, so strangely contrasting with that she had lately quitted.

A lofty, oak-paneled room, from whose walls quaint old family portraits frowned or smiled at the doings of the present race; a row of tall, narrow windows looking out on the lawn; elegantly simple, chintz-covered furniture of modern date; lovely marble statuettes in niches, and graceful groups of statuary on the floor, relieved by masses of foliage, plants, and flowers; books and ornaments lying here and there in pleasant disorder; sunshine streaming softly about the fair girlish figure seated at a small round table at the upper end of the long room; such was the *coup d'œil* which struck Marjorie with mingled admiration and pity.

For, though her surroundings were charming, there was something sad in the solitude of the youthful aristocrat, whose clinging nature seemed to make her specially unfit to stand alone in life. How different the loving home atmosphere which Marjorie had breathed ever since she could remember! which, it might be, she would cease to breathe ere very long!

"You, at last lazy bones?" her ladyship cried, lifting her eyes and seeing her.

"You have not missed me, I hope, dear Dolly," Marjorie said affectionately, going forward to her; and Lady Dorothea, quickly shutting the open novel with which she had been engrossed, to the neglect of the dainty breakfast-tray before her, listened good-humoredly to her friend's apologies.

"Your coffee is cold and your dry toast is tough, you poor little Dolly! Let me ring for somebody to get you a fresh breakfast," Marjorie said, when her ladyship had kissed her and sat down again.

Lady Dorothea shook her yellow head in alarmed refusal. "Oh, not for the world!" she said, gulping down a mouthful of lukewarm coffee. "It is my own fault; I sent the man away, wanting to get peace to enjoy my breakfast, and then I took up this book and forgot all about it."

"You're afraid of your servants, aren't you, Lady Dorothea?" questioned Maja, while she buttered a bit of toast for her; and she looked at her with a kindly, quizzical air.

"Awfully," said her ladyship, succinctly, and without a vestige of a smile.

"You must give up being afraid of them, though; you must snub me when I forget and call you Dolly; and indeed you must change all your funny ways."

"I sha'n't, Maja, not if I live to be as old as Methuselah. Besides," she added, stretching out a caressing hand and laying it on Marjorie's, "I like you to call me Dolly: nobody but mamma does now, and mamma not often." And she ended with a sigh.

"It will be glorious on the loch, the frost is so hard and the air so clear. Do let us go soon," said Marjorie, seeking to change the tenor of her friend's thoughts.

"It won't be glorious for me, Maja. You will make me skate, though you know I'm frightened; and you run away and speak to all sorts of nice amusing people, and won't introduce them to me. I know how you did last time."

"But I won't run away this time, Lady Dorothea, unless just to have a peep at my father, who is to be there curling."

"I wish mine was to be there, as he used to—oh, Maja, how glad I should be!" And the girl's blue eyes filled as she made this startling remark *à propos* of the long-dead earl.

"Hush!" said Marjorie, the door opening just then and Lady Castleton appearing.

"Come to my dressing-room for a few minutes, Marjorie. You can come too, if you like, Dorothea," she said, pausing on the threshold, and nodding a morning salutation to both girls as they rose to their feet.

"Finish your breakfast first, children," she added, noticing the breakfast equipage.

"We have finished, mamma; that is, I don't want any more, and Marjorie has not had any," Lady Dorothea explained, going towards her.

"A puzzling statement, like most of yours, Dolly," Lady Castleton remarked, with the slightly sarcastic air which always frightened her simple little daughter; and Marjorie felt bound to interpose with a more lucid explanation, which was graciously accepted.

Marjorie was one of the countess's few favorites, and returned her flattering preference by an enthusiastic, reverential attachment, of whose depth neither her ladyship nor anyone else had any just idea, for she was extremely shy in manifesting a feeling so unlikely to be understood.

Only occasionally she forgot herself; and this morning, when, having taken her to her dressing-room and opened a jewel-case lying on the table, her ladyship put into her hands a magnificent set of rubies, requesting her to accept of them as a mark of her friendship, she looked up with eyes which were almost worshipping.

"Oh, Lady Castleton, how good you are! How am I to thank you?" she said; and as the countess, smiling kindly, held out her hand, she kissed it with such a pretty air of respectful affection that the lady's sad, cynically inclined heart was deeply touched.

The two were standing side by side, and Lady Dorothea, looking on at this little scene, was struck by its picturesque grace. Lady Castleton, so tall and stately in her sweeping black draperies, her exquisitely chiselled, pallid face, glorified by its rare smile; Marjorie, so charming in her fresh, girlish beauty and pretty humility, glancing up with tears in her dark eyes, and a becoming rush of color warming her clear brunette complexion; a tall mirror reflecting their two striking figures, set off by the appropriate background of the lofty, luxuriously furnished chamber; an open door showing, in dim perspective, a sunny, chintz-curtained bedroom beyond.

"Thank me by being very happy when you wear them, child," said the countess, with a little sigh; and Marjorie fancied that her thoughts had gone back with longing to her own fair youth, when such now stale and tiring matters as balls afforded delicious, intoxicating enjoyment.

Then, with a sharp pain, she wondered whether, if Lady Castleton could read her heart, she would turn away from her in anger and contempt. Lady Castleton stood to accept her as a daughter in well-born, wealthy Miss Lisle's place! The very idea was preposterous; yet, if she knew herself, she would not marry Lord Castleton, unless his mother would continue her friend.

"I hope you like them, Marjorie," her ladyship said, as Marjorie, with downcast eyes, thus thought.

Lady Castleton was struck by the look in the girl's face when, after a moment's hesitation, she upturned her eyes to hers, heaving a long sigh and speaking with suppressed vehemence of entreaty in her voice.

"Ah, Lady Castleton," she said, "I do like them; they are most beautiful; but I wish you would not give them to me—I don't deserve them. If you knew me as I know myself you would not give them to me; you would throw them into the fire in preference."

"Oh, Maja!" cried Lady Dorothea, who had drawn near to look at the set; and she turned to her mother with an air of deprecation, feeling sure that she must be displeased by this unprecedented folly of her friend's.

Lady Castleton was startled for a moment, and bent a keen, inquiring gaze on her *protege*, whom, until this moment, she had regarded as a mere light-hearted, thoughtless child, not quite so transparent as her Dorothea, perhaps, but quite as incapable of duplicity.

Now, when the countess chose to study a character, she was not easily blinded. In that quick examination of Marjorie's face she got a glimpse of her inner life which afforded her no little interest.

The girl had a secret—a love one, doubtless; she was afraid lest she should find it out, yet had a liking for her, and blamed herself for leaving her in ignorance of it. She was sure of all that; now for a consideration of what this secret could be. She was not going to let Marjorie leave her until she arrived at some reasonable conclusion. This poor child, whom they had all spoiled so, must be helped out of whatever troubles she had stumbled into.

"Help this incomprehensible little friend of mine to fasten her rubies, Dorothea. I want to see how they will suit her to-night," Lady Castleton said, with perfect kindness, motioning the two girls toward the mirror, and seating herself a little aside, where she could watch Marjorie's looks.

"You know that I thank you with all my heart, Lady Castleton," the girl she was studying pleaded; and her soul was in her dark eyes as she turned them on her face.

"Yes, I know that, Marjorie."

And, to the utter amazement of Lady Dorothea, the usually reserved, stately lady beckoned Marjorie to her with a gentle, gracious wave of her fair jewelled hand, and, drawing her close, kissed her blooming cheek with a half-shy tenderness which very nearly upset poor, self-scorning Maja, and made her turn quickly to her waiting young friend.

Lady Castleton had no liking for gossip, and but little was communicated to her. Whether Marjorie had ever had a real lover she did not know. She had heard young Alton spoken of as an admirer of hers; she surmised that so pretty a damsel must have made other conquests among the gentlemen farmers, to whose set she properly belonged. Mrs. Vesey had annoyed her by hinting her suspicions of Mr. Crawford's infatua-

tion. Was there anybody else likely to attract that warm, girlish heart? And then she thought of her son, so handsome, gay, kindly-natured, careless about consequences; and, as if by a flash of lightning, she had a momentary glimpse of the danger to which their imprudence had exposed this child, who had grown up in their midst, treated almost exactly like an equal, and yet expected to remember that her lot in after-life would of necessity be cast outside of their aristocratic world.

She felt convinced that Lord Castleton had not taken advantage of Marjorie's false position to offer any lover-like attentions—she had never seen or heard of him doing so; but he was imprudent, he liked fair ones; it was possible that the child had allowed herself to fall in love with him without his being more than a little to blame; and if so, a great wrong had been done, and it lay at the door of the Castleton family.

All these thoughts glanced through her brain in the space of a few moments; then, angry with herself for being unhappy upon purely hypothetical ground, she resolved to banish her suspicions for the present, and, if she saw need, pursue her investigation calmly by-and-by.

Meanwhile, there stood pretty Maja, the tears still in her eyes; smiles and blushes struggling to drive away that unwontedly earnest look which had surprised the countess; the rubies shining on her delicate, brown-tinted throat, and ears, and wrists; a stray sunbeam playing amidst her soft, dark hair. Nineteen, and a beauty, and going to her first ball—how hard it would be to say anything depressing to her to-day!

"Won't she look like a princess, mamma? Don't she suit lots of jewels?" cries stupid Lady Dorothea, forgetting to be frightened in her enthusiastic admiration; and Lady Castleton surveys her with her melancholy smile of approbation.

"Won't she startle Lord Castleton! He has never seen her wear such jewels," blundering Dolly proceeded, still in ecstasy, and her mother looked sharply at both girls.

Alas for poor Marjorie! her color came with a rush, and Lady Castleton's suspicions were confirmed. Lady Dorothea looked, as she felt, perfectly innocent. At least there was reason to be thankful that she had not been made a *confidante*—poor foolish Dolly, whose turn it would be to have love-troubles next.

"By-the-by, I forgot to order the carriage to meet him. Ring the bell in my boudoir and tell them to send round to the stables. Marjorie will come to you directly, Dorothea," the countess said, a little sharply, for she could not help being annoyed by this speech, though, now she came to think of it, innocent Dolly had often before made such remarks without it ever occurring to her that any harm could result from them. She must have been dreaming, and it was more than time to open her eyes.

"And what dreadful wickedness have you been guilty of, Marjorie?" she asked abruptly, though with a smile of wistful friendliness.

A young girl's love—passionate, credulous, romantic, utterly independent of such prosy matters as reasonable foundations for its exaggerated hopes—had not she known it well, too well for her heart's peace?

As she spoke she again beckoned Marjorie to her, and the girl had no choice but to obey her unconsciously imperious gesture.

"I don't know, I am sure; I have tried to be good often—sometimes—Lady Castleton," was all the answer she could make; but she looked so sweetly ingenuous as she spoke, standing in front of Lady Castleton's chair, her cheeks crimsoned and her eyes dropped, a pathetic quiver about her mouth, that her air pleaded for her more strongly than a speech of the most studied eloquence could have done.

"Well, I shall not keep you from Dorothea. Run away and enjoy yourself, child; it is not always May in this hard world. I suppose if you live long enough you will find that out for yourself, if you have not done so already." And once more her gaze was one of kindly, sad inquiry.

Marjorie's bosom heaved with a deep-drawn sigh. She tried to speak, but could not find words, so confused was she by the tumult of thoughts the countess's unprecedentedly tender manner aroused.

"And when you find it out, come to me, Maja, if you think I can do you any good. I shall understand, at any rate, child; and it is not every one who can understand, you know."

Her glance, earnest, sympathetic, full of sad interest, made her words perfectly intelligible to the girl, whose heart went out towards her with an impulsive yearning her own gentle, calm mother's appeals had never awakened.

A still beautiful countess, in sweeping robes of black silk, with delicate lace ruffles about her throat and wrists, seated in state in a charmingly appointed dressing-room, dispensing rubies and kind words with the same melancholy graces, was a species of divinity to our poor Marjorie, who had more of the artistic nature than people gave her credit for.

"When I am in trouble and want help to do what is right I shall come, Lady Castleton," she said, dropping on her knees and kissing her hand; and there was such real reverence and gratitude in her upward glance that her ladyship could not suspect her of any interested motives in thus humbly paying her homage.

Then rising, and making a pretty obeisance with truly French grace, she withdrew in an inward flutter of hopes and fears.

Lady Castleton certainly liked her, would certainly understand her temptations, and perhaps by-and-by even come to look upon her marriage with Lord Castleton as the only natural way of disposing of the difficulties that waylaid them all.

If only Lord Castleton still loved her and would tell her so! But the evening would decide her fate.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SKATING SCENE.

THE loch presented a very animated appearance, for there had been little severe frost that season, and almost every lover of the roaring game whom the neighborhood boasted had now turned out to enjoy the rare treat of a day on the ice.

Sturdy, red-faced squires of the olden school mingled freely with the farmers and tradesmen of the neighboring county town, who chiefly filled the ranks of the curlers. Their sons and daughters kept a little aloof from the vulgar merriment which their elders loved, and disported themselves after their own fashion, skating, flirting, chatting, and laughing in little coteries, formed of members of the same caste. The boys and girls of the parish school, set free for a holiday, flew one after another in noisy glee down long slides of their own construction. A couple of hucksters had erected their stalls on the edge of the loch, and were doing a brisk trade in biscuits and confectionery. A few servants in gay liveries, in attendance on the carriage-folks present, lounged about, helping to give color to the scene, upon which clear sunshine poured down, brightening the tall dark firs that encircled the little loch, and making its snow-sprinkled bosom sparkle beautifully.

Timid Lady Dorothea would have liked to sit down on its banks and be a mere spectator of the gayety, but to this proposal both Marjorie and the little aristocratic circle, who speedily gathered round her ladyship, offered vehement opposition.

She was fairly forced into her skates and borne off, alternately shrieking and laughing, between two agile, good-natured, Eton lads, home for their Christmas holidays.

"Come too, Maja!" she cried, casting a look of entreaty behind her; but Maja, seeing her safe among a perfectly unexceptionable set of county folks, had already darted off in an opposite direction, intending to have a little independent tour of the loch and see what was going on for herself. Nobody need be shocked at her doing that, she thought, so long as her father was close at hand, and a party of friends within the range of sight.

So she skimmed away like a swallow, the keen air and exercise making her cheeks flush and her eyes sparkle underneath her coquettish black-felt hat, placed well back on her dark hair so as to set off her piquante, brunette face to the best advantage.

"There goes old Bruce's daughter, the prettiest girl in the parish."

"Yes, in the county, you may safely say," two young bank clerks from D—, great dandies in their way, remarked in *sotto voce* fashion, as she passed them, and their stare was one of fervent admiration.

Then they wheeled about, and Marjorie, perceiving their wish to keep in her neighborhood, darted off towards the curlers, from whose quarter a cheery noise of applause and laughter was proceeding, a champion player having just made some wonderful hit.

She liked those manly, simple, plain men, with their exuberant spirits and hearty Scotch voices, and lingered a little outside their ranks peeping at the game, smiling interest in her face.

Old Mr. Alton, standing among the on-lookers, intently watching the players, was startled by overhearing a disparaging remark follow her appearance, and involuntarily withdrew his attention from the game to fix it on the speaker, a well-to-do young farmer of the neighborhood.

"A wife of Miss Bruce's sort would give a man hard work, watching her," he said, coarsely, with a laugh, and the friend he addressed, a youth of the same class, responded in similar strain.

"Ay, if there was a fine gentleman within a score of miles distance. She is a dainty young lady, you see."

"If she was a modest one she wouldn't be such a favorite as she is with some folks, what do you think?" sneered the first speaker, whom Marjorie had mortally offended by a rebuff, when, at one of the very few parties she had attended to please her parents, he had presumed to be over-gallant in his attentions.

"Well, his lordship is to be at the ball to-night, and so is the beauty. We'll keep a lookout on them, young man."

And then, unable to restrain his anger, the kind, pure-souled old man broke in on their tolerably loud-spoken colloquy.

"For shame, lads!" he said, with a quiver of indignation in his voice, and a spark of the old youthful fire in his eyes. "Have ye no manlier work or play to occupy your time, but must needs divert yourself slandering an innocent young thing behind her back? Let there be an end to this!"

"I said no harm of her. If I did, I was only joking."

"Nothing but a bit of fun, Mr. Alton," the two offenders said, rather frightened lest fiery Mr. Bruce should be told the whole story.

"Men who have had good mothers, and hope to have good wives some day, should joke on very different subjects," the old man answered, with an air of impressive rebuke; then he turned away from them, and, much to their dismay, went up to the girl.

"John Alton's going to marry her for certain. You've put your foot in it finely this time, and I wish I'd been a mile away when you did it," the introducer of the conversation was told by his friend, and a quarrel spoiled the remainder of their forenoon.

Marjorie liked old Mr. Alton, and greeted him with her riendliest smile as she shook hands, and inquired after his health, which had been feeble of late.

"The weights of the clock are near run down, I'm thinking, Miss Bruce," he answered, quaintly, a sober smile passing over his thin, refined face, and he shook his silvered head with a rather melancholy air.

"Ah, don't say that, Mr. Alton!" and the young girl still held his hand, looking infinitely troubled.

"I can't complain o' the clock, though; it has gone its warranted time and a year over. John and me kept my seventy-first birthday yesterday, my dear;" and he smiled the pathetic, patient smile of old age, though he could not repress a sigh.

"Spring will wind it up again," said Maja, in her hopeful way, nodding her pretty head at him.

"Maybe, little lady, maybe, springs such as you and me have never seen," he answered, with a sort of sad humor; and then his son, who had been among the curlers, came up.

"What are you two talking about that you look so solemn?" asked he, as he took Maja's offered hand.

"About clocks," was the girl's prompt reply; and she looked up into the young man's pleasant, dark face very kindly, inwardly wondering, with a pang of commiseration, how he would bear the inevitable parting with this most loved of fathers.

"Clocks!" he echoed, in surprise.

"Ay, clocks, lad; old-fashioned concerns that have gone clean out o' date, and should be taken down to make room for some o' the fine new workmanship o' the day," old Alton said, looking affectionately at his puzzled son; and, used to his father's quaint way of expressing his thoughts, he got a glimmering of what was in their minds, and shook his head in rebuking fashion.

"I like old-fashioned things and people, Mr. Alton; the longer I live, I find out their value the more," Miss Maja says, with her droll air of mingled wisdom and cajolery; and Mr. Alton, senior, understands how it is that Miss Bruce has already done such havoc among the impressionable young male hearts of the neighborhood.

"Don't you skate?" she adds, turning to John Alton, who is looking as much pleased as if she had complimented himself.

"I used to. I have grown too old and heavy, alas!" and he regards her slight, graceful figure with tender admiration.

"Tuts, tuts! never mind him, Miss Bruce. He's a mere laddie yet, and as light on his feet as a two-year-old," the old man interposes hastily; and his anxiety to correct any false impression the preceding speech may have created is so easily interpreted that both young people smile and look confused.

"He is only too lazy, Mr. Alton. But to-night, at the ball, we can't let him be lazy, he must remember."

"No fears of him, if you'll look after his doings, Miss Bruce," says the father, while the tall, stalwart young man smiles in that queer, expressive way which Maja understands so well.

It was pleasant to have his tender, amused eyes rest on her face, follow her movements. She skimmed away presently to meet approaching Lady Dorothea and her young cavaliers, a sort of inner sunshine gladdening her spirit, the quiet, warm sunshine of his pure, steady love.

Somehow she had never seriously considered her duty to this faithful lover, whom she had summoned back as a pleasant friend with whose society she could not well dispense.

The girl was, in a measure, spoiled. Ever since she could remember, she had sat, metaphorically speaking, upon a throne, from which she might dispense her favor at her pleasure, sure of finding many grateful, flattering subjects waiting at her feet.

Her foolish, fond father had been the first to bring delightful homage in her baby days. As she grew older, others had been drawn within the magic circle of her fascinations, and she had imperceptibly become a good-humored despot, strongly inclined to a belief that matters were merely in their normal state when her court was thronged.

Besides, John Alton was so wise, so strong, so self-sufficing in a good sense of the word, it could never be that she needed to guard against over-endearing herself to him: he was not at all likely to make himself lastingly unhappy because of her, let her do what she would.

Old Alton felt bound to communicate to his son the conversation which had roused his wrath, and the young man's face grew so stern that he was sorry he had spoken.

"You don't think she has given any cause for such ill-speaking, John," he asked, with a shadow of misgiving in his tone.

"Father," exclaimed Maja's lover, in indignant remonstrance, "I thought you knew Marjorie Bruce!"

"You may keep yourself cool, lad. To my thinking, the lassie's heart is as pure as the snow lying at our feet;" and the old farmer glanced down, a kindly, trustful smile on his face.

"Thank you, father;" and the clouded brow cleared a little.

"You looked so black, John, I fancied you mistrusted her a bit."

John Alton looked black once more, but only for a few moments.

"Yes, no doubt, and I felt blacker, I dare say; but I was thinking of other folk than that innocent little woman, father," he said, forcing a smile. "I'd just like to be a heathen for a little space, father, and settle that couple of miserable wretches in old-fashioned style," he added, his brown cheek flushing, and a rare, angry light gleaming in his eyes, spite of his attempt at maintaining a jesting manner; and regarding his well-knit, tall, muscular figure, and resolute, dark face, his father thought it was well for the two offenders that he was only a heathen in momentary fits of anger.

"I settled them for this time, John. Let's say no more about it: there must be no quarrelling on the ball night, anyhow."

"I know that; but, father, it is hard to bear. This isn't the first time slander like this has come to my ears, and it makes me mad, for I can do almost nothing to crush it. I have no right to defend her—at least no more right than any ordinary acquaintance, people think;

yet"—And here he broke off his eager speech with a deep sigh and forced himself to be outwardly quiet, ashamed of his loss of self-control; then father and son returned to the busy spot they had quitted, that they might talk without fear of being overheard.

"You bad girl!" cries Lady Dorothea, as Marjorie comes within ear-shot; "I have been looking for you everywhere. What did you mean by running away so?"

"I meant fun," says Maja, comprehensively, making a droll little pirouette, which displays her skating powers, and excites the admiration of the two unfortunate lads to whom her young ladyship has been clinging with the desperation of a helpless coward.

She smiles upon the boys as she speaks, looking comically sympathetic, and there and then she adds to her list of admirers a couple of new names, for they both blush furiously and lose the proper use of their tongues, which have been going glibly enough when only Lady Dorothea was by.

"Let us all try a race, do! it will be good fun. Let go for a minute, there's a dear!" Maja says, cajolingly; and, with a giggling little scream, her ladyship releases the firmly grasped hands of her youthful cavaliers, and the three dart off Marjorie keeping the lead, while Lady Dorothea pursues them in momentary expectation of a tumble.

"Catch me if you can!" Maja presently cries, throwing a bright glance over her shoulder as she skims away towards the quietest part of the loch, and her gay laugh echoes through the frosty air very pleasantly.

Lady Castleton, who has walked down to the loch to have a look at what is going on, recognizes the fresh young voice, as she stands leaning on the fence which interposes between her woodland walk and this part of the sheet of water, and sighs softly to herself.

"Poor child!" she murmurs, as her eyes rest on the dainty, darting, girlish figure which wheels about again to meet its pursuers; "there was never a countess had such a laugh as that;" and then, without lingering to exchange greetings with anybody, she moves away along the lonely fir-bordered path which leads to the mansion.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DRESSING FOR THE BALL.

HALF an hour more, and it will be time to dress for the ball—the ball where she is to meet him again, after all these slow weeks in which she has lived in anticipation of the glorious life that is to begin now.

Maja has her pretty bed-room all to herself, and goes wandering about in a restless flutter of joyous excitement, her dark hair streaming over the white dressing-gown she had hastily thrown on, her eyes shining with a rare love-light, her soft, rounded cheeks tinted with warm, delicate bloom, a smile hovering about her sweet mouth and bringing out an occasional dimple.

There are a couple of candles on the toilet-table, but their dim light is swallowed up in the glorious, dancing fire-light, which fills the room, or rather that upper part of it round the hearth where the girl's dressing paraphernalia have been clustered; dark shades sleep beyond, and a droll, fantastic, shadow accompanies that moving figure, weirdly mimicking its graceful, varying movements.

She stops to survey her pretty ball-dress lying in state on the bed, and her head on one side, like a meditative robin, conjures up a picture of herself in it; she takes her rubies from their dainty satin-lined case, the very handling of which is a pleasure, and, putting them on, stands before the mirror, softly smiling to her own fair image reflected from its dim depths; she does pretty, foolish things without end—stretching forth her fair, rounded arms to admire the glowing jewels that clasp her wrists—shaking her dark-haired little head to make her drooping ear-rings sparkle—making graceful, sweeping courtesies, such as her Parisian dancing-master used to praise in her already far-away schooldays.

Then the recollection of that unconsciously diverting personage sets her laughing, and she longs for Lady Dorothea, or somebody who has known him equally well, to join her in a merry chat over his peculiarities, and, failing this resource, gives vent to her spirits by whirling swiftly round the fire-lit chamber in a waltz step, singing to herself in that full, warbling, soprano voice which is the envy of half the young ladies in the neighborhood.

"Gude save us, is the bairn crazy?" an amazed, gruff voice from the doorway suddenly cries out as Miss Maja is making her second tour of the apartment, and, looking round, she sees old Bell holding up her hands and shaking her white-capped head.

"Tra-la-la, tra-la-a," the pretty maid sings on, finishing her dance for Bell's benefit; then she makes a wonderful, prolonged courtesy, and drops into a chair with a long-drawn sigh of exhaustion.

"Dear old Bell!" she says next, sinking back on her seat and holding out a caressing hand to the old woman, who has come forward to her side, and she smiles upon her rather sadly. "Were you ever very, very happy, Bell, long ago, you know, when you were a lassie? Tell me, like a dear old wife, as you are."

"Ou, ay, I've been as big a fule as my neebors, Miss Maja; I needna tell a lee about it;" and Bell returns her smile with one of rather sad fondness.

"And I did it last, Bell, your happiness?" more softly, and with an irrepressible shadow of fear in her tone.

Bell drew a long breath, but made no other answer, and the girl went on in a sort of whisper:

"That sort of happiness can't last, I think, Bell, or there wouldn't be any need of heaven for some folk."

"Whist, bairn! whist! Ye're eneuch to bring down a judgment on your head!" Bell sighed, giving an eerie glance round her into the shadowy part of the room, and Maja felt indefinitely frightened.

"Oh, don't, Bell!" she pleaded, sitting up in her chair and fixing her eyes on the rugged, kind face looking down at her. "I didn't mean any harm, and it can't be a sin just to be awfully happy."

"Na, na, Miss Maja; if ye've fand your happiness! the richt road, it's na sin, I'll warrant," Bell answered, gravely; then, glancing round on the evening-dress array which covered the bed, her heart smote her for saying anything that might damp the child's long-looked-forward-to enjoyment.

"Let me see your braws, Hinny," she said, smiling; and, glad to banish the thoughts the old body's words had awakened, Maja jumped up and began exhibiting her treasures.

"And wha are the sweethearts that are to be there, Miss Marjorie? Ye were na practisin' your steps to dance your lane the night," quoth Bell, with a knowing nod, and a keen look at the damsel whose love affairs she had never yet rightly been able to understand.

Marjorie's cheeks had an extra tinge of pink as she answered, with a little laugh and toss of her head.

"Don't speak about sweethearts, Bell; you'll bring a judgment on us next; I wonder at an old woman like you even naming the word!"

Then, wonderfully tickled by this display of wit, Bell burst into a hearty laugh, while the girl stared at her in diverted surprise.

Witticisms such as Miss Bruce and her father occasionally uttered when conversing with her, were, in her opinion, well entitled to the reward of her hearty appreciation, and a prolonged cachinnatory convulsion followed this sally.

"Hush!" Maja interposed, rising and hurrying to the window. "That sounds like a carriage stopping at the gate."

Wiping her eyes on her apron, Bell followed her to her post of observation.

It was a moonlight evening, and the road which wound by the farm-house was easily distinguishable.

Drawn up at the low gate stood a carriage and pair—the Castleton carriage, as Maja perceived with a sudden thrill of mingled hope and fear.

"Gude preserve us!" Bell began, but the girl stopped her with an eager "Hush!" and watched in feverish anxiety two well wrapped-up female figures step out of the vehicle, the solitary footman helping them to alight, and preceding them to the hall-door, whose bell presently vibrated beneath his dignified pull.

"I'm sure it's Lady Dorothea and her maid; but run down and see, Bell, and ask if there's anybody else in the carriage; I'll be down directly, but I'll wait here till you come back," Maja eagerly directed, still watching the carriage with a lurking hope of seeing Lord Castleton pop out next; and, grumbling a little at "bein' driven about for a wheen idle, stravaigin' gentry," the old woman left the room to carry out her order.

Directly after, the girl's throbbing heart was calmed a little by the sight of the carriage moving off, the footman having retaken his post upon it.

Evidently no earl was there—how could she have dreamed of such a possibility, and he newly arrived, and bound for the ball so soon? Far better that she should see him there, when she was looking her prettiest in her lovely ball-dress and jewels.

There came the sound of footsteps and voices outside her chamber door, and she hurried to open it and learn what was going on.

"I have come to dress your hair, if you will allow me, Miss Bruce."

"I've brocht ye a leddy barber, Miss Marjorie," the applicants for admission, old Bell and Lady Dorothea's maid, Jackson, simultaneously explained; and the girl laughed and bade them come in.

"That is so very kind of you: thank you very much," she said, putting out that kind, ready little hand of hers with a friendly grace, and bestowing a sweet smile on the stranger.

Jackson, a sharp-eyed, middle-aged little Englishwoman, of quiet, decided bearing, whose chief weakness was a strange fondness for the odd little lady she was constantly snubbing, was mightily pleased, and, coming into the room, began to arrange the toilet paraphernalia, while Bell looked on rather jealously.

"I've seen the day I could ha' busked Miss Maja myself, but it's no noo. Fashions ha' altered, an' I'm ower auld a dong to learn new tricks, so I'll awa' an' get my tea," she presently said, with a sigh; and giving her youthful mistress a last fond look, she trotted off, Marjorie promising to call her when she was fully dressed for the ball.

"Lady Dorothea is getting a cup of tea from Mrs. Bruce; she will come up directly. Please let me begin at once, in case we should be late," Jackson said, as the young lady would have run away to greet her distinguished visitor; and feeling bound to give no more trouble than she could help, Marjorie seated herself in her appointed chair before the mirror, and let her attendant brush out her luxuriant, dark hair, affably chatting to her the while, though at heart she was burning to hear all the news of Lord Castleton's arrival.

When her loquacious ladyship appeared she would speedily have a detailed account of the whole afternoon's performances; till then she would not mention his name.

"And what style shall I dress it in, Miss Bruce?" Jackson presently questioned, pausing in her vigorous brushing.

"Ah, that is a solemn subject; let me see, now," and she went into a brown study for a full minute, during which her companion had leisure to admire the grace-

ful *debutante*, and think that so charming a damsel was seldom found out of the aristocratic world.

"White silk and tulle—scarlet geranium—let me see," Jackson mutters, meditatively, glancing at the bed where the finery lies; then Lady Dorothea rushes in, and there is a general disturbance.

"Oh, Maja!" she says, running up to her and taking hold of her hand, "is it not too bad of him, after I have looked forward to his visit so!"

"Too bad of who?" says Marjorie, forgetting her grammar in the pang of terror which lady Dorothea's speech strikes through her heart.

"Why, of Lord Castleton, to be sure, Maja, you stupid! Don't you know he has not come, and isn't coming?" And then Maja's heart stops beating, the two human beings beside her become shadowy shapes, the fire-lit, familiar room swims around her, and the world seems to come to an end.

This is how she feels, as, her hand still in Lady Dorothea's, she stands motionless in front of the mirror in which Jackson, who is on her feet in the background, can survey the two girls.

Lady Dorothea's glance has fallen on the ball-dress, and, unnoticing as she is, her attention is diverted before she had time to discover Marjorie's startling change of expression; but the maid perceives it, and is struck with pity.

"How pretty your dress looks, Maja! How that geranium will suit you! Oh, I wish I was going too!" and her ladyship trips away to amuse herself with an examination of everything her happy friend is to wear.

"Would you mind sitting down and letting me go on with your hair, Miss Bruce?" says Jackson, gently, after there has been a momentary pause, in which the color has gone on fading from the delicately blooming, youthful face.

To Marjorie her voice sounds as if it came from some great way off. She turns her head a little round and fixes her eyes on her concerned, frightened face with a peculiar air of agonized interrogation, and her lips move without a sound escaping them.

"What a deal you'll have to tell me to-morrow—won't you Marjorie?" Lady Dorothea chatters on, wheeling round now, and Jackson comes to the rescue with no little address.

"If your ladyship is going to keep interrupting in this way, Miss Bruce's hair will never be done in time: would your ladyship please to get a book or something and leave us alone for a little?" she says, rather imperiously; and, as dismayed Lady Dorothea stares at her, she leans forward and whispers to Marjorie with a soft touch of her sleeve, "Would you like a glass of water? Do you feel faint? Sit down, and I'll attend to you directly."

Marjorie understands it all by this time, and sits down, drawing a long breath and shutting her eyes for a moment. Her heart had resumed its beating, though with a dull pain which she has never known before; the room has ceased to swim—she sees both their faces quite clearly when she presently looks up—the world has begun its weary course again, and she must behave like other people.

"Thank you, I am all right, Jackson; let us go on now," she says, after a little feeling for her voice, which has got lost somehow in that by-past whirl of her poor head, and she forces out an affirmative reply to the hitherto neglected question of her ladyship.

"Yes, a deal to tell, of course," she says, with another long sigh.

She has heard of sufferers at the stake who bore their awful tortures with shut lips and brave, calm faces; she is at her stake now, and she will not flinch. Was not the fire of her own kindling, after all?

"Sit down and be quiet, Lady Dorothea. See, Jackson is going to make a wonderful coronet out of this dark name;" and she turned her head over her shoulder and smiled, though her smile was not quite a success, the woman fancied.

"A coronet!" Lady Dorothea repeated, thoughtfully, wondering whether this style would suit her, and a hateful rush of color passed like a wave over Marjorie's face and neck, leaving her very white indeed, next moment.

"Why, how pale you are, dear! Look at her, Jackson!" her ladyship cried out, taking her hand. "And her hand is as chill as a statue's," she added, in increased concern.

So, after all, they were going to find out her secret, and she would have people pitying her, and petting her and wondering over her folly. Not if she could help it, anyhow.

"I do believe I want a cup of tea; I was too excited to eat my dinner. But it is too bad to hinder you, Jackson."

"Oh, Jackson, is very good; she won't mind," Lady Dorothea interposed, coaxingly; and that wise individual, allowing herself to appear completely hoodwinked, went away down stairs to send up the cup of tea Maja begged for.

"And why is he not coming?" Marjorie asked, with a startling abruptness, when the girls were left alone.

"Oh yes! By-the-by, I had only begun to tell you: well"—and she drew a stool to her questioner's chair, and sat down on it—"it seems he had written to mamma ten days ago, telling her that he had changed his mind and was not coming home, and the letter had gone wandering somehow, and only arrived when the carriage was just going off to meet the London train he always comes by; and now he actually is not going to come until Nannie is coming, and then they are to have a quiet Lent marriage directly after; and everybody wanting them to wait till Easter, when I shall come out, you know. Oh, is it not too bad of them!" and she lifted her head and stared up into Marjorie's face, seeking sympathy with her woes.

"Ce n'est que le premier pas qui compte," and Marjorie took up her role with a sort of stupid acquiescence.

"Yes, of course, poor Dolly," she said, with a long

sigh; and then Jackson came in with a little tray, and Maja changed the subject in haste.

"Why, how late it is!" she exclaimed; "six o'clock"—glancing at her watch—"and we are to leave here at half-past seven."

"You happy girl!" sighs Lady Dorothea; and Jackson, who is just putting the cup of tea into Marjorie's hands, sees that her words send a shiver through the poor child's whole frame.

Quite unconscious of the rebuking glances which her maids is darting towards her, her young ladyship returns to the discussion of her brother's enormities.

"By-the-by, Maja, he actually says it is possible they may get married there at Mentone, at the English Consulate, or some place of the sort. Ernestine does not care how quietly it goes off—the marriage, I mean—only, Mrs. Vesey begs so for it to be in London, he thinks it more likely it will be there, after all."

"Little pitchers have long ears, your ladyship," the clever, kind-hearted waiting-maid says, tapping her own ears significantly, as she stands behind Marjorie's chair.

She takes all sorts of liberties with her mistress when nobody of consequence is by; when in public, she is her most respectful and taciturn attendant.

"You know you never tell what you overhear me say, you queer woman;" and the yellow head is nodded good-humoredly.

"I know if I did your ladyship would never be out of trouble," the kind soul adds, divided between a longing to shake her hopelessly obtuse mistress, and an equally strong longing to send that proud-spirited, suffering Marjorie Bruce away, to have out a good, hearty fit of sobbing in solitude.

Possessed by a strong suspicion, that the earl and Miss Bruce had grown fonder of each other than they dared proclaim, she had, out of a species of soft-heartedness which she now greatly regretted, delayed communicating to the radiant young lady the disappointing news of his lordship's non-arrival; only, as she should have foreseen, that Lady Dorothea might rush in and fling it at her head in her wonted blundering fashion.

Of course his coming or staying ought to be nothing to Miss Bruce, of Torwood Farm; he was as good as married already, besides being an earl, and as far above her as the sun is above a daisy that laughs up at him from earth's green lap. Only girls will be girls, and she could not help being sorry for the foolish child, whom nobody seemed to have tried to keep out of temptation.

As she went on arranging the soft, dark tresses, she marked with pitying admiration the desperate efforts to appear like herself which the young lady made, and marveled over the dense stupidity of chattering Lady Dorothea, who, refusing to take offense at her attempts to snub her, kept up a quiet flow of small-talk, utterly unsuspecting of anything being amiss.

An instinctive consciousness of her attendant's pity nerved Marjorie to bear up under the trying ordeal of this weary toilet-making. A slightly heightened complexion, a more than wonted sparkling light in her eyes, a restlessness of motion, are the only symptoms of inward disturbance she manifests.

But, oh, the intensity of that hidden pain! The sting of it, all was a heart-elt consciousness that she was being justly punished for the deceit and selfishness she had permitted to take root in her heart.

Yes, even while she owned that her punishment was just, she shrunk with positive repugnance from the path of duty conscience pointed out so plainly now—the quiet return to simple, straightforward ways; the self-renunciation implied in taking up such a life as other girls in her rank fell into so naturally; the banishing of every thought connected with Lord Castleton.

So she miserably meditated after her first stupefaction was over, and she had nerved herself into outward composure; then, by a strong effort, she drove away these thoughts, and determinedly pondered her course of action for the evening.

Everybody's eyes would be upon her; it was her first public appearance, and she knew well enough that she was not a girl to be passed over with little notice. Many who had expected to see the earl at the ball would be sure to connect any signs of dejection on her part with the fact of his absence, and she would be ridiculed, or, which would be even more intolerable, pitied, for a love-lorn, credulous simpleton. If she died of hidden agony, she would be gay—she would dance, laugh, jest like the lightest-hearted girl in the room—so that nobody, not even John Alton, should guess there was anything wrong; and her cheeks grew hotter and her eyes shone with feverish brilliancy.

A minute or two later she was in the parlor, where her parents and John Alton sat in friendly converse round the blazing fire.

A queen-like maiden, in sweeping draperies of white silk and tulle, unrelieved save by a bit of color the cluster of scarlet geranium in her dark hair and the jewels that clasped her delicate throat and wrists, her cheeks flushed, her eyes alight, flashing bright glances at them all in turn, as, having crossed the threshold, she paused and made a grand obeisance.

"Shall I do?" she asked, with a queer little laugh which sounded unlike her own. "I am saddled and bridled and ready for the race: you remember our old rhyme, papa," and then there was more crowding round her and turning her about, and her father went into raptures of admiration while the other two smiled at his unrestrained transports, though neither of them could help looking pleasant flatteries.

"And it is only the other day she was a baby, Mr. John—a funny, wee, brown thing, with a string o' coral beads round her fat neck, and morsels o' red shoes on her feet. Heigh-ho!" and her father's jolly red face took on a shadow of sadness. "I wish I had her safe on my knee again, my baby lassie, and we had all the pleasant years to go through—eh, Maja?"

Marjorie was shaking hands with John Alton by this

time, and he could see that, when her father thus spoke, her lip gave a sudden little quiver, and her eyes filled.

"My darling, my beautiful, pure-souled darling, whom nobody but me understands!" he said in his heart, a great rushing wave of tender longing sweeping over it, and his eyes, bent on her face with a half-unconscious gravity, lighted up as they never did when they looked upon any other woman.

Maja had time to perceive that eloquent glance, and to feel vaguely comforted by it, ere she wheeled round to her father with a smile of reassuring affection.

"They have been pleasant years, old dad; I'd like to go back to my baby days very well," she says, in rather a wistful way, as she comes up behind his chair and puts her pretty bare arms round his neck.

"I had you all to myself then, and you were content; no dreams of sweethearts and white silks and jewels, and such-like vanities, ever troubled your wee noddle," half-whispered the old man, sighing and regarding her fondly, his head thrown back to meet the fair face bent over him.

It was true, and a passionate yearning for the lost peace and simplicity pained her restless heart, though she answered lightly, addressing herself to the others, because she could not trust herself to keep calm if her father went on with his tender reminiscences.

"Who would think that this melancholy old gentleman was on the eve of setting out for a ball? I wish you would pull him up, mamma; he is quite a wet blanket to my spirits, and it isn't fair of him;" then, with a parting, fond look, she swept away to rejoin her ladyship in the upper chamber and be looked for her drive to D—.

Mrs. Bruce had no liking for balls, and had thankfully made over the *chaperonage* of her pretty daughter to Mrs. Stirling, of the Hollow, the wife of the factor of Torwood estate, a middle-aged lady, with ball-attending propensities, and no daughters of her own to exhibit. Mr. Bruce could not resist his longing to see Marjorie's triumph, and so was going to accompany her.

"Though I go, it's only to please the lassie, ye ken, Mary," he said, when, Marjorie having gone, the conversation turned upon this ball. "My dancing days are done."

"Mine have never begun," John Alton remarked, with a smothered sigh, and the color rose to his dark face as he smiled and let his eyes fall to the carpet.

"I hope you will enjoy yourself, in spite of that, Mr. John," spoke Mrs. Bruce, looking kindly troubled, and her husband chimed in with a similar speech.

They both knew very well that his going was the result of Miss Maja's pleadings.

"Ah, do come. It is my first ball, and I want everybody I like to be there; do, if only to please me!" she had said one day they chanced to be left alone for a little, and he had represented the uselessness of a non-dancing individual attending a ball, and there and then he had succumbed to her persuasive powers, though aware in his heart that the evening would be a trying one for him, who loved her so dearly, yet would be forced to see her lavishing her precious smiles, her pretty graces, on a score of men who cared for nothing but her beauty.

"You see, wife, Maja does not seem the least put about because the earl isn't to be there. If her heart was ever smitten, it is cured already," Mr. Bruce said to his wife, when they were alone in their own room, and she was tying his neck-tie for him, with a pleasant, kindly smile on her comely face.

Mrs. Bruce, who had heard of the girl's sudden paleness from Jackson, felt doubtful whether this assertion was not over-confident, but she would not trouble him with useless misgivings.

"Now you look quite smart, father," she said, with a cheerful nod and smile, which served as an assent to his remark.

"Quite a beau—eh, Mary?" he asked, in his old-fashioned way, and he made her a bow such as gentlemen were trained to make in his young days, when George the Fourth was king.

"Quite a beau, to be sure, once you have this in your button-hole," said the good lady, holding up a lovely sprig of heath, which Lady Dorothea had culled expressly for the purpose.

"Her ladyship says none of the young men of this age know how to make such bows, and she likes to meet you on that very account; so I think your fine manners have maybe earned your heath, gudeman," she went on, as she fastened in the flower; and the laugh which followed this sally penetrated to Marjorie's chamber across the lobby, and made that young lady sigh as she stood before the mirror, taking a last look at her graceful self.

"When I am old like them I shall have forgotten how to laugh," she thought, bitterly; and then the sounds of approaching wheels made her concentrate all her faculties on the present evening's occupation.

For a few hours more she would be Marjorie Bruce; she would be somebody else to-morrow, next day, all the dreary, dragging days that remained of her appointed lifetime. She would glory in her beauty's crown only this once more. To-morrow for the dust and ashes of penitence, the taking up of all these hated burdens she had left other people to carry during this joyous, by-past season of girlhood.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BELLE OF THE BALL.

"Won't you sit during the next waltz? You are tiring yourself out, Miss Bruce," says John Alton; and Marjorie, who has just been brought back to her *chaperone* on the arm of a gallant young officer of dragoons, gives the speaker a glance and a smile of assent, which her gay cavalier thinks quite unnecessarily friendly.

"Child, child!" Mrs. Stirling remonstrates, shaking her plumed head, and drawing in her voluminous, purple-satin skirts to make room for her on the bench,

where she sits in dowager state, watching the gay, whirling scene which the D— Assembly Rooms present, "you will dance yourself into a fever. Such sparkling eyes, such glowing cheeks already, and the evening not half spent!"

"You ought to have brought her back to me by force before this, captain," the matron adds, with another reproachful head-shake, and she upturns her hook-nosed, dark, *distingue* face to the officer, who stands in front of his late partner, guarding off other admirers, particularly the solemn-eyed, broad-shouldered nobody, who is hanging about with such cool persistence.

The captain and a few other officers, whose regiment chanced to be then quartered at the barracks, are the only followers of Mars present, and great has been the rivalry among the young ladies for the securing of partners so effective in dress and bearing, as well as so interesting through the mystery of their antecedents.

The captain stares rather boldly at Maja, sitting fanning herself, and looking at John Alton, who stands a little aside, apparently watching the dancers take their places for the waltz which the regimental band is now striking up.

"Do you know what song Mrs. Stirling's exclamation suggested to my memory, Miss Bruce?" And the dragoon lowers his voice, and looks adoring.

"No, of course I don't; I am not a witch," the young lady retorts, a little pettishly, for she wants him to go away and let her speak to her hitherto neglected friend, whom she has tempted from the peaceful comfort of Torwood Downs to the uncongenial whirl of D— Assembly Rooms.

"Ah! I'm not sure of that," the gentleman remarks, fondling his fair mustache, and throwing out his broad chest as he heaves a prodigious sigh; "but this is what came into my head—by-the-way, do you understand German, Mrs. Stirling?" And he wheels his head over his shoulder to look scrutinizingly into that lady's face.

"Not a word," she laughs. "You may proposee in that language, if you like, and I shall be none the wiser, captain."

"Ha, ha, that is capital! Ain't it now, Miss Bruce?" the dragoon says, forgetting to look sentimental in his appreciation of this joke. He had the blessed faculty of being very easily tickled, Marjorie thought, and looked rather contemptuous as, willing to change the subject, she asked, "Do you sing German songs? I only know a few of them."

"I delight in them, and this is one of my favorites;" and keeping his bold gaze on her face, he repeated, with no lack of fervor in his tone:

"Du hast Diamanten und Perlen,
Hast alles was Menschen begehrt,
Und hast die schönsten Augen,
Mein Liebchen, was willst du noch mehr?"

"Mit deinen schönen Augen
Hast du mich gequält so sehr,
Und hast mich zu Grunde gerichtet,
Mein Liebchen, was willst du noch mehr?"

and he hummed the refrain, playing with the hilt of his dangling sword, and looking as lovelorn as he could.

"Is it not a pretty thing, Miss Bruce?" he asks; and Maja's cheeks grow hotter than ever as John Alton, whom she has summoned to her side by a beseeching gesture, looks at her in a sort of sad surprise, and then fixes his eyes on the musical dragoon.

"I don't think it is pretty at all," she says, rudely, and her admirer stares in a nonplussed way.

A moment after, she is carried off, and when her late companion gets his next glimpse of her she is flying round the ballroom in a swift gallop, her cheeks in a glow, her eyes shining with the excitement of the moment, her pretty dark head nestling to a comparative stranger's shoulder.

"There goes the belle of the ball," says somebody beside him.

"Her ball-programme was filled directly she came, and I can't get even a touch of her hand," says a companion young gentleman, lugubriously.

"She has not broken her heart, though the earl has failed us."

"Ah! she has none to break, like most lovely young ladies, I dare say." And John Alton thinks he has heard enough, and goes wandering away through the suite of rooms, feeling sadly like a fish out of the water.

He owns as much to old Mr. Bruce, who has been card-playing among an elderly group, and is on his way back to the ballroom to rejoice his fond eyes with the sight of the lassie's triumph.

"Sit down and play then, man," says that gentleman, with jolly indifference; "but if I had had the up-bringin' o' you, you'd ha' learned to dance: women set more store by that accomplishment than by the wisdom o' Solomon;" and the young man sighs as he smiles assent.

He does play, after all; but it is not in the card room of the glaring, crowded suite, where the aristocracy of D—and its neighborhood are making merry. It is in the parlor of Torwood Downs, whither he has trudged in the peaceful, soul-soothing moonlight, and his partner is that dear old father whom he had startled out of a solitary musing fit in his big chair by the fire, by the cheery cry, "Here I am come back to you like a bad shilling, father. I wanted a game at backgammon, and stole away early. We'll finish the night comfortably, in spite of the Hunt Ball."

"And what did ye think of the ball, Mr. John?" old Nancy, their faithful housekeeper, asked, as she brought in the hot water for their toddy half an hour later.

The abstracted look with which Mr. John had been meditating a move, his dark head resting on his hand, disappeared in an instant, and a humorous smile brightened his face as he answered, with friendly good-humor:

"Indeed, Nancy, I thought the folks that went to balls seeking happiness were what you call 'verra far left to theirsels.'"

"I'm the youngest man o' the twa, Nancy," old Alton laughed, as the old woman raised her hands in surprise, more affected than real, and uttering a rebuking exclamation. She could not bear that her young master should appear contemptuous of such festive gatherings, at which she firmly believed him capable of shining more brilliantly than any other man in the neighborhood.

"Deed I think you're richt, Mr. Alton," she responded, shaking her head at the delinquent, who was busy mixing her up a glass of toddy.

"This is to drink my health in, Nancy, and may I never be tempted to another ball," Mr. John says, with his imperturbable good-nature, and she takes it from his kind, brown hand, and is vastly pleased and grateful. Nor does the young man sleep less soundly because he has, with his simple, thoughtful kindness warmed into quiet gladness two tried old hearts, whose throbs, either of suffering or of enjoyment, are like to stop ere a very long time has passed.

Hours after he is sunk in sleep, Marjorie Bruce paces her moonlit chamber, hot tear streaming down her fair face, her little hand clasp and unclasp themselves with the nervous restlessness of inward suffering.

"I do not love him; he is fickle, and false, and ignoble. I never did love him; I was only ambitious and vain, and wanted to be a countess," she says, setting her teeth to silence a rising sob, and she almost convinces herself that she is speaking the truth.

Then she goes to a little casket where she has hoarded her love treasures with such jealous secrecy; and lighting a candle on the mantle-shelf, sits down in a low chair by the slowly dying fire, and takes them out one by one.

Some faded flowers; a broken meerschaum pipe; a lock of hair stolen from Lady Dorothea, who had begged some for a locket; a couple of sackingly sawled notes, flung away by the same young lady as soon as deciphered; a photographic carte which she had got from his own hand—that was all; but each foolish memento suggested some by-gone pleasant moment, some keen, regretful longing, and her tears rained down over it, and her heart softened as she lived over again all her blessed secret love-life, nor did they feel the expiring fire, after all.

"I shall put them back to remind me of my vanity and folly, and make me penitent every time I look at them," she whispers, with a stern resolution not to spare herself deserved pain; and then she closes and locks her casket, and goes to bed to cry herself to sleep, just as the farm-yard cocks are beginning to proclaim the dawning of the new day, which is to begin a new era in her existence.

CHAPTER XXI.

A CALL AT TORWOOD DOWNS.

CLICK goes the latch of the low green gate opening from the quiet high-road, and Marjorie Bruce walks slowly through, and begins looking about her with the air of one who has a loving interest in her surroundings.

Noon sunshine, the welcome reviving sunshine of a February day, floods the earth; but low in the horizon watery clouds are gathering, threatening to obscure the azure overhead.

A shower had just passed. Rain-drops glitter on the quaintly clipped old yews and hollies which border the modest little avenue, casting stiff shadows across it. Freshly washed snow-drops and crocuses bloom in the sweet-smelling, newly turned-up brown soil of the flower borders on either hand, where blackbirds hop about on the lookout for the first worms of the season. The ivy, which completely cloaks a ruined barn standing in picturesque uselessness on the right side of the graveled approach, is audibly dripping, while the sunbeams bring out its fairest green.

An aged, yet ruddy-faced, hale farm laborer, lately promoted to the post of gardener, quavers forth a psalm tune, as with bent back he piles his shining spade among the shrubs.

The girl's eyes take in all the simple beauty of the scene, and a sweet half-smile, which reminds one of her mother's, dawns on her face as she saunters on up to the house, Torwood Downs, where the two Altons have their quiet bachelor home.

"Good-morning, Tam," she says, with a friendly nod, as she comes upon the solitary worker; and Tam stops, and, resting on his spade, bestows upon her a familiar grin of acknowledgement.

"Gran growin' wather, Miss Bruce," he responds, eyeing her with a steady stare of curious scrutiny, which marked special interest, as seeing him expectant of further greeting, she lingers a moment.

"Your flowers are thriving, Tam," she says, looking round her approvingly. But this speech is not received as a compliment.

"Na, they're nae flowers o' mine. I hae nae skill o' sic useless things as flowers. Ye may ca' them Mr. John's flowers, an' ye will; for it's him that potters awa among them every mornin' afore his breakfast, an' at mony an odd hour forbye."

"Ah!" observes Miss Bruce, demurely, and her dark eyes fall; then, with another friendly nod, she goes on her way, the old man following her with that same curious, interested gaze until she disappears, a turn of the avenue presently hiding her lithe, girlish figure.

"John's flowers!" she whispers, softly, a becoming blush warming her fair young face, and her eyes grow tender as she smiles down on the next cluster of snow-drops she passes. Then she stoops and gathers a tiny bouquet of the simple flowers the borders boast—fresh wet snow-drops, blue hepaticas, golden, lilac, and purple crocuses.

"John's flowers!" she whispers once more, dreamily smiling as she stands arranging them; then glancing round to see that nobody is observing her, she puts the gay bunch of sweet spring treasures to her lips, saying a little prayer in her heart, though her bonny face never loses its smile.

Maja has changed somehow. Her eyes are graver and deeper, her brow more thoughtful. Her whole air tells us that she has of late lost in animal spirits, and gained in inward serenity.

As she lingers by a boxwood bush to pluck a few twigs, whose subdued green will tone down the too brilliant hues of her bouquet, a man's figure approaches from the opposite direction with quick, firm tread, and a pair of suddenly lighted-up dark eyes watch her with a lover-like interest, their owner meditating over this change the while.

She hears his step and turns round; then runs forward to meet him, dropping some of her newly gathered flowers in her haste.

"John!" she says, in a tone that implies a great deal of fond affection and trustful familiarity; and smiling up into his eyes, she clasps his arm between her tiny, flower-laden hands.

"Maj: here all alone!" he answers in his tender, deep voice; and his bronzed face beams with pleased surprise as he stoops down and kisses her, quite as a matter of course.

The dainty little damsel is looking very pretty and simple to-day, in her dark-green walking costume, relieved only by snowy linen bands at her fair throat and wrists. John Alton thinks the world does not hold such another sweet maiden, and his eyes tell her plainly enough what thought is passing through his mind.

She laughs up at him, giving her head a slightly coquettish toss.

"I did not come to see you, mind; I came to see your father."

"Of course, I know that very well, you unkind Maja."

"And I am not very sure that my calling here is at all proper, Mr. John."

"Neither am I, Miss Marjorie."

"If you are painfully shocked, I can go home again. Nobody has seen me come in except stupid old Tam and yourself," and Maja gives him a pull and stops him glancing gayly up into his fond, smiling eyes.

Nowadays, John Alton can never keep up a long joking conversation with Marjorie.

He grows suddenly solemn, and putting his arm around her, draws her close to him.

"Oh, my dear!" he says, with infinite pathos, "how happy you have made my dull life! How I bless the day I first saw your bonny, mischievous face! How on earth is it that you have come to like a heavy old-fashioned fellow like me, with nothing but an honest hand and a true heart to offer you?"

"Oh, John, don't, don't!" sighs the girl, beseechingly; and in another moment her head droops, and he sees that her eyes have filled.

While he looks at her in concerned surprise, she goes on falteringly, her bosom heaving, her lips quivering, tears glittering on her long, curling eyelashes.

"When I look back and remember how wretched and sick of living I was not two short months ago, until you came back to me and comforted me, and taught me how to find peace, it seems to me as if I should be thanking God for you all day long, and every day of my life; and in a gentle passion of gratitude she laid her sweet face down on his arm and let it rest there, her whole frame trembling with emotion.

A great throb of joy follows his first distress at having agitated her.

"And you are content, my dear?" he questions, stroking her soft hair.

It was not a very strong word, content, and he would have liked her to replace it by one of more emphasis when she answered.

She did not do so, however; only added another improvable adjective.

"Oh yes, I am content and grateful to you, John," she says, sighing as if momentarily oppressed by some sad recollection.

"And quite happy, Maja?" he asks again, just a little anxiously.

He is thinking of the change which has come over her since that day just after the Hunt Ball, when, with an utter absence of premeditation, he had for the second time asked her to become his wife.

How gentle she has grown! how unselfish, and thoughtful of the feelings of others! how docile, and touchingly eager to please him and everybody who loves her!

Can she help it if the romance of girlish first love is not transferable—if even there is still an occasional heart-ache within that innocent bosom? By-and-by she will quite forget all the past, and be as happy as if no selfish, fickle young lord had made a plaything of her sensitive heart. Kind time heals many troubles, and girls of eighteen are surely among his most promising subjects.

"And quite happy, John," says Maja, eagerly, "a great deal happier than I deserve;" and she sighs penitently, thinking of by-gone follies and waywardness.

"God bless you, little Maja!" whispers John, as she lifts her head from his breast, and they go on their way once more, her hand carressingly lying on his arm.

Is she keeping back anything? Not consciously, at any rate.

She tells herself that she is quite happy, at least as happy as a girl can be after having made such shipwreck of her first love; after having waded through such a slough of despond as her own folly had landed her in.

Yet she owned that it was possible she had been too hurried in engaging herself to John Alton. She wanted to think and dream of him only; yet thoughts of the

past would come sometimes, bringing idle longings which she dared not put into words.

Perhaps this was inevitable. Heart sores like hers would not heal in a few weeks. She could not forget her former lover painlessly, with miraculous instantaneousness; although in a fit of pique and wounded vanity, and longing to have the solace of a true, noble heart that loved her, she had spoken to John Alton an impulsive word or two, which had resulted in her dropping her tired head on his kind breast and promising to be his wife.

John Alton was now her dear betrothed, and she was learning to love him more and more every day she lived. To her he was the best man in the world, the kindest and truest, and most worthy to be loved and revered.

And her parents were so happy, and old Mr. Alton so touchingly grateful, and everybody so kind and hopeful of her future; yes, and best of all, a peace of conscience, to which she had long been a stranger, was daily growing within her.

So it was that on this sweet spring morning, within the seclusion of that peaceful spot where her home was to be ere many weeks had passed, her heart was full of serene content, and she could answer her far-seeing lover's wistful inquiry with no conscious deception.

The two paced the little avenue in quiet, loving converse, until a shower sent them into the house—an old-fashioned, whitewashed, two-story building, whose windows would, when summer came, look out of a wonderful growth of climbing roses.

In the sitting-parlor—a long, low-roofed apartment with three windows, affording a pleasant look-out on the shrub-adorned lawn and newly ploughed lands beyond, old Mr. Alton now sat in that peaceful idleness which old age seldom dislikes.

Maja knew the high-backed ample chair and its occupant very well by this time, and ran in with the confidence of one who is well assured of a welcome.

"I have come to see you all by myself to-day, because neither papa nor mamma had time to accompany me, and John has been scolding. He says it isn't proper; what do you say, Mr. Alton?" she quickly inquires; and she lets the smiling old man kiss her velvet, pink cheek, and drops down on his footstool, resting her hand on his knee, while John, who has followed her in, stands leaning on the mantel-shelf, looking on with dark eyes full of approving love.

He likes to watch them together, to conjure up pleasant pictures of the coming days, when the sunshine of her presence will always be about the old house, and his father will rejoice in it almost as much as he will himself.

"I think it is quite proper, my dear; I think everything is quite proper that isn't wrong in itself, and gives somebody pleasure," old Mr. Alton responds.

"I don't know that, by any means, Miss Maja," laughs the young man, shaking his head and looking across to his father, who is sitting listening, a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"After all, there is nobody like him, my bairn," says the fond old man, with emphasis.

"Nobody in the big world," the soft youthful voice chimes in.

The subject of their praises laughs and shifts his position, coloring a little.

"He ought to be exhibited as a unique specimen of humanity, then, Maja," he says. Then a servant calls him away to see a stranger, who has come upon farming business, and the other two are left to entertain each other with his praises, which, in truth, form the staple of their conversation when nobody else is listening to them.

Maja likes to hear the gentle old man discourse of John's early days of college glory: his patient, tender watching by his elder brother's death-bed; his obstinate self-renunciation from the day on which, shutting up his loved books, he had announced his determination to take the vacant post at his father's side; the puck and skill with which he had pulled them through long accumulated pecuniary troubles, after many cheerfully borne years of care and toil; his refusal to accept the fortune to which he thought that his far-away cousin had a juster claim.

Many such stories were poured into Marjorie's ears, and always listened to with unfeigned, admiring interest.

"The sun has been long in rising for my dear lad, but maybe it will gladden his heart the more, my dear," old Mr. Alton says, after there has been a thoughtful pause in the conversation; and he looks into the fair young face with a meaning little smile, which explains his words—the sun of her love he would say.

"I love him; I shall try hard to make him happy when I am his wife: he knows that I am trying to grow worthier of him," she responds, looking very sweetly humble, and she softly presses the thin old hand which is held out to her.

Presently she rises, declaring that she must go, as she has promised to be home for dinner.

While the two are amicably contesting this point John Alton re-enters, bringing her a note from her mother, and telling her that its bearer awaits an answer.

Father and son look on with a little anxiety, while, her face clouding over, she reads this unexpected note:

"DEAR MAJA" (it says, in hasty penciled strokes)—"Lady Castleton wants you to go to London for a few weeks, setting off to-night, when Jackson is going up and would take charge of you. Talk it over with John, and be guided by his wishes; your father and I wish you to do just what he thinks best. If you decide about going, come home as soon as possible, that we may pack a few wearing things. Your other luggage can follow. I enclose Lady C.'s letter. Your loving mother, MARY BRUCE."

"I sha'n't go! I don't care what they think of me!" she exclaims, rather pettishly; then she takes the chair her betrothed has brought her, and handing him her mother's note, peruses Lady Castleton's.

Old Mr. Alton quietly withdraws to another room, so that the two young people may discuss this mysterious difficulty without the embarrassment of a third party's presence: the shire does not hold a more considerate gentleman than this plain old man.

"MY DEAR MRS. BRUCE" (writes Lady Castleton dating from her London residence, whither she and her daughter had repaired a few weeks ago)—"I am about to ask a great favor: that you will spare me your daughter for a little while.

"My girl is not at all well—the influenza with which she left Torwood clinging to her still—and our doctor declares she must have somebody to amuse her until she is able to go into society.

"Should Marjorie come, my invalid and I trust you will allow us to look after her *trousseau*, and so give a little mark of our appreciation of her many affectionate services. My daughter's maid would attend Marjorie up to London, should she be able to come at once; if not, I would gladly make any other arrangement which would suit her better.

"My son is still on the Continent, and I do not expect him to return until Easter. Tell Marjorie that I shall not be in the least offended by her declining to leave home so near the time fixed for her marriage, although I should feel much obliged by her paying us a visit of even a fortnight's duration. Wishing your dear daughter much happiness in the new sphere of life upon which she is soon to enter, with kind regards to your little home circle, I remain, your very sincere friend,

Theresa Castleton."

John Alton, whom Marjorie had called to her side that they might read the letter together, was the first to speak after they had finished its perusal.

"I do think it is hard!" he sighs, as he stands behind her chair, and Marjorie resolves that she will stay at home, and let Lady Dorothea find some other amusing nurse.

"Then I shall not go. Ah, John, how seldom you say anything is hard!" she says, upturning very kind eyes as he leans over her.

"I have little cause for grumbling. Ah, my dear, I ought not to think anything hard, so long as you live and love me;" and he comes round to her side, and takes the carressing little hand she holds out with a smile.

"Well, I mean to live and love you a long time—if I am allowed—and to refuse Lady Castleton's invitation too. Are you content now?"

A very faint sigh ends this speech, but faint as it is, his ear catches it, and he perceives that she could be easily persuaded to grant the favor her ladyship asks.

"Would you like to go, Maja?" he asks, in his straightforward way, looking keenly at her, and she blushes and drops her eyes.

"No, of course not," she answers, with a little petulance; "only this isn't a matter of liking or disliking, I suppose. It is simply one of duty—*ought* I to go or to stay? That is what I want you to tell me."

"It is difficult for me to be impartial in giving judgment on such a matter," sighs the young man, eyeing the girl's cross, flushed little face very lovingly.

"There is a good deal to be said on both sides of the question," he admits directly after, his generous, trustful heart rebuking him for grudging her the innocent pleasure a London visit doubtless represented to her.

"Tell me what you think I ought to do, John," she pleads, repenting of her momentary ill-humor; and then they go into a grave discussion of *pros* and *cons*, finally deciding that, in consideration of Lady Castleton's many previous kindnesses, she is bound to oblige her in this matter.

"Only I sha'n't accept the *trousseau*. My own humble one is in course of preparation, and it will content me very well. You would rather I didn't allow Lady Castleton to add to it, I know," Marjorie concludes, suppressing a sigh once more as tempting visions of bridal finery rise on her inward vision.

His face assumes a slightly frowning look as he answers her.

"Please yourself about that, Marjorie. I have nothing to do with it."

Then, as she looks up with rather a hurt expression, he suddenly changes his tone.

"Oh, child, child!" he says, "what do these little things matter to me? Don't you know that all I want is to see you happy? The Castleton family may load you with costly presents if they like, if they will only send you back loving me a little as you do now. That is all I care about."

"If I had only kept poor Will's money, Maja, I could have surrounded you with the pretty things you are used to, and like so well," he adds, ruefully.

Marjorie stares at him in surprise; then, prompted by one of her irresistible impulses, she does a very astounding thing.

"You are not to begin making a useless baby of me, John Alton," she says, rising. "I don't care a bit for pretty things in comparison with the happiness and honor of being your wife;" and, shyly blushing the while, she slips into his arms and upturns her sweet face for a kiss.

"My darling!" is John Alton's tender speech, as he sees that her beautiful eyes have filled with tears; and he takes her in his arms and folds her to his throbbing heart—that pure, high-souled heart whereon no woman's head but hers has ever rested in all these grave years of his young manhood.

And so we shall leave them comforting one another in this pleasant fashion, while the spring sunshine, once more triumphant over the clouds, streams in at the three little windows, filling the quaint, simple room with cheerful brightness.

CHAPTER XXII.

A GIRLS' QUARREL.

"AND you are very happy, Marjorie?" asks Lady Castleton, uplifting grave, inquiring black eyes to the girl, who has by invitation come into the library to give her an account of her journey of the previous day, and of her doings generally.

The countess's head aches this morning. Literature has no charms for her, and it has pleased her to interest herself in the study of this fair, blooming specimen of innocent girlhood whom she has summoned to her side.

By dint of graciously spoken, low-voiced questioning she has drawn from her all the principal details of her engagement to John Alton. How Marjorie really feels under it, is what she is now attempting to discover.

"Yes, indeed, Lady Castleton, I am very happy," echoes our heroine, casting down her eyes demurely; and she takes the carressingly extended small white hand and lays her own softly over it, blushing sweetly as she gives this demonstration of affection.

The countess's heart goes out to the pretty, graceful maiden who is bold enough to show that she really likes her, and her smile tells that the cause is welcome. She is rather a fanciful lady, and it has often struck her that if her Dolly and Marjorie Bruce had been changed in their cradles, she, for one, would have found life a little more satisfying. Dolly would have been much happier as a simple, love-encompassed, rustic maiden, and Marjorie could have filled her young ladyship's place very charmingly.

"And what makes you so happy?" pursues her ladyship, still holding her hand and looking into her face, which direct question confuses the girl a good deal.

"Ah! Lady Castleton," she falters, with a little shy embarrassment, "I surely ought to be happy; he—John Alton"—she corrected herself with an apologetic glance—"is so good and kind—nobody but me knows how noble he is—what a grand soul he has. I know you will not laugh at me for speaking so of him," she adds, in her pretty, cajoling way.

Lady Castleton's fine face has assumed its gentlest expression. She pin's to a chair beside her, inviting her *protegee* to be seated.

"I am not the least inclined to laugh at you, Marjorie, child. I believe your betrothed deserves all the praise you can give him. Let me tell you that I liked his kind, strong, dark face the very first time I saw it—in the little Torwood church, one Sunday last July. He was in your pew with your father and mother and I you; and while a sleepy sermon was going on I amused myself watching you and him, and thinking what a handsome, well-suited young couple you would make. Everything I have been able to learn about him since, has but served to confirm my very favorable first impression, and I think you are a very fortunate girl," the countess says, with earnestness.

"He is a very good man," says Marjorie, gravely, a great deal impressed by this praise from so distinguished a quarter.

"And every inch a gentleman, besides," affirms her ladyship, in a tone which implies that a true gentleman is a *rara avis*; and aristocratically inclined Miss Bruce feels more grateful for that compliment than for all the rest.

"Yes, a man may be a gentleman, though he is a simple-living, tenant farmer," she says, looking up with a slightly pensive air after there has been a little silence, and Lady Castleton looks hard at her and sighs, though she answers lightly.

"A man may be a gentleman, though fortune decrees that he should make his living as a scavenger; that is my firmy rooted conviction, Marjorie," declares her patroness, with a little laugh. "I have found ladies and gentlemen—nature's ladies and gentlemen—in all sorts of humble surroundings; and so will you find them if you will begin to look about you with unprejudiced eyes."

"I have begun to grow a little wiser than I used to be, Lady Castleton. I understand what you mean," says the girl, holding down her head with the air of one who acknowledges herself deservedly rebuked. She is always sweetly docile when Lady Castleton, who so seldom shows special interest, vouchsafes to bestow upon her some little bit of half-spoken, half-implied rebuke.

Her ladyship proceeds, with rare affectionateness of manner and look.

"My child," she says, "I am so pleased to know from your own lips that you are happy. It seems to me that a married life entered upon under such auspices cannot fail to be a beautiful, peaceful, *full* life; and I, who have had five-and-forty years' experience of our world's ways, know well that there is nothing worth your envy there. By-and-by I hope to come and see you safely settled down in your pretty country home, and hear from Mr. John Alton that you are making him the best little wife in the world. You will be glad to see me, won't you, Maja?" And she gives her one of her patietic smiles.

"Ah! yes, Lady Castleton; I shall never forget your goodness to me—never, so long as I live. I should be the most ungrateful creature alive if it were possible that I should do so," responds Marjorie, rising.

"I am not at all sure that I have been good to you, my dear," says that lady, moved into a frankness which she only showed on rare occasions, "but assuredly I never meant to be anything else."

"I put you in the way of falling in love with my son, and so brought a deal of useless pain to your foolish young heart; that is what she means, thinks Marjorie, and her cheeks grow hot. Rightly suspecting that the countess guesses her thoughts, she feels greatly relieved by the appearance of Lady Dorothea.

"I am seeking my nurse," says the new-comer, approaching with her slow, invalid step; and her mother's eyes turn with unwonted tenderness to her

sweet, pale little face as she comes up and kisses her.

"Thank you for bringing her to me, mamma," she says. "I shall grow well all at once now."

"I think you are a little impostor, Dolly," her mother tells her; then, guessing that the two girls will be glad to have a long confidential chat, she sends them away to Lady Dorothea's morning-room, sadly sure that her presence would be a restraint on their youthful gaiety.

Left alone, she thinks over her interview with Marjorie. She has a particular reason for wishing to know exactly how her *protegee* feels to her betrothed, for she has that morning received a letter from her son intimating the probability of his return to London within a few days. If Marjorie did not appear perfectly happy in the prospect of marrying John Alton, she would at once ask Lord Castleton to absent himself for a little time longer. As it is, she thinks that there is no necessity for interfering with his arrangements.

No; Miss Lisle's magnificent *trousseau* is in course of preparation, as is also little Maja's simpler one. Two wedding-days are fixed, and it is absurdly late to begin meddling among the young people, who, after all, seem quite able to take care of themselves.

Mrs. Vesey and Miss Lisle expected to come to town very soon after Lord Castleton, so Marjorie would not be likely to see much of him.

Her ladyship, determined that she should have her short sojourn in London made as pleasant as possible, and carry away pleasant memories of them all, decides to trust her implicitly, and let her son come when he will.

"Oh dear, this is nice! This is quite like old times! I feel it is really worth while being ill to have you sent for, Maja," laughs Lady Dorothea, as the two establish themselves for a morning's idle enjoyment, and she sinks back among the downy pillows of her special lounging-chair and heaves a sigh of satisfaction.

"How agreeable it is to feel it your duty to be lazy!" remarks Marjorie, seating herself in an equally enticing chair on the other side of the hearth.

"How your duty?" questions her ladyship, arching her pretty eyebrows.

"You are half an invalid yet. I must not tempt you to any active exertion. I must not excite you in any way—*ergo*, it is my bounden duty to be lazy. Lady Dorothea," is Marjorie's gravely comical explanation.

Marjorie was very fond of Lady Dorothea, and with her fondness mingled a vague consciousness of being treacherously chary in bestowing her confidences upon her. The innocent ingenuousness natural to her high-born friend made it impossible for her to perceive this, and many a time her boundless trust awakened a pang within Marjorie's less transparent heart.

"I do wish you would not tell me everything," she was wont to say, and this morning in particular she found occasion to utter this speech several times, for her ladyship was in one of her most communicative moods, and speedily launched into a frank recital of recent family history, giving due prominence to the doings of the male head of the house, in whom Maja is determined to take no special interest.

"You remember Kitty Howard, Maja—at school, you know?"

Thus innocently the dangerous subject is introduced.

"Perfectly, Lady Dorothea. I see her bold, black eyes laughing as they used to, when you merely mention her name."

"Well, she came out last season, you know, though she is a year younger than I am. She is quite a woman of the world already, and talks—oh! I can't tell you how she *does* talk." And her ladyship shrugged her shoulders and puckered up her sweet, fair, young face into disapproving frowns. "She called to see me the other day, and stayed ever so long; and, oh, how my poor head did ache before Jackson came in and took her away by force! And only fancy what she told me about Herbert Maja. But perhaps, you too have been told—things about him—for people at Torwood keep themselves wonderfully well informed of what he is about." And her ladyship pauses, fixing inquiring eyes upon her.

"No, indeed, I never listen to gossip about my superiors," laughs Miss Bruce, in rather a confused way, and a tell-tale glow suffuses her cheeks.

"Don't you feel the fire scorch your face?" she adds, and, rising, she lifts a small, prettily painted hand-screen, and, thus fortified, prepares for the worst, only marvelling what striking revelation is to follow.

Lady Dorothea is too full of a sort of awfully wrong interest in her brother's reported misdemeanors to observe this maneuver, and proceeds in a lowered tone.

"Well she says he is growing quite fast—what she calls delightfully fast, Maja. The Howards are just home from Paris, where, it seems, Herbert has been passing a deal of time at intervals since he went to the Continent. He hates letter-writing so much that we never know half of his movements; and Charlie Howard—Kitty's eldest brother, you know—told her he was quite as wild as any of their set, and altogether he was quite changed in his ways."

It was then that from behind her fire-screen Marjorie made her first remonstrance against being made the recipient of such confidences.

"Besides, I don't believe a word of it," she added, with a good deal of heat; "and I know that if I had a brother, and people came to me behind his back and told me anything whatever against him, I'd quarrel with them there and then, Lady Dorothea."

Her ladyship looked a little taken aback, and set about explaining how Kitty had not accused him of any serious iniquities—only of being, like her own brothers, reputed to lead a free-and-easy, Bohemian sort of life when adrift from his family ties and away from his betrothed.

"You see, Maja, the poor fellow is not exactly in love with Ernestine—never was, you know. Everybody understands how the match was made up, long, long ago, when they were both children. Well, no doubt he is restless, and out of spirits now and then, and you can't wonder that other fellows, like these horrid Howards, manage to get hold of him and draw him off to billiard-rooms and"—Lady Dorothea hesitated, feeling out of her depth; then added vaguely, "And funny places I don't know anything about or you either."

"I don't want to know anything about them either, Lady Dorothea. Please to talk of something else," said Marjorie, in a tone of decided irritation.

Lady Dorothea sighed, and persisted in her attempt to excuse his absent lordship, regretting that she had thoughtlessly given her confidante an altogether unintended bad impression of him.

"Why, my dear Maja, you know all this will be changed when Ernestine marries him. Of course he'll settle down then and make her the kindest and best husband in the world. All young men must sow their wild oats some time or other, I suppose, and better before marriage than after it, surely."

"I am thankful I am not a fine lady," remarked Maja, with a scornful glance which gave relevance to her words.

To her, fresh from her simple, pure-souled mother's side, blessed with the priceless treasure of a good man's reverent, tender love, this easy-going, comfortable morality was positively offensive.

She thinks it very dreadful that this fresh, sweet nature should be imperceptibly assimilating itself to the conditions of fashionable life which surrounded it, and forgets the tolerant charity which would absolve the youthful aristocrat from any intentional desertion of the path of rectitude.

The last few weeks have done more for Marjorie's spiritual elevation than all the previous years of her life, but they have not taught her a thorough control of her quick temper. Unfortunately, such a lesson is not learned in a hurry.

"I do not know what on earth ails you this morning, Marjorie!" complains her ladyship; and thereupon Marjorie lays down her screen, and regarding her with scornful dark eyes, blazes out into an indignant short-lived rage, which makes her companion start up from her lounging attitude and stare at her in innocent amaze.

"Why, you never used to be so awfully particular about these things, Maja, I'm sure," was her gentle, good humored defence, which struck Marjorie as so just and incontrovertible that she instantly felt ashamed of herself.

"I never used to know John Alton, Lady Dorothea," she says softly, her pretty, angry face changing its expression for one of sweet penitence; and, coming up to her ladyship's chair, she stands before her, looking in a deprecating way into her wide-opened blue eyes.

Lady Dorothea holds out a forgiving hand, and laughs merrily.

"You queer girl!" she says, "you are always in extremes; one never knows what you are going to do or say next. You quite frightened me with your ill-temper, do you know?"

"I am very sorry I was so rude," says Marjorie, very soberly; and her ladyship assures her of her forgiveness.

"Talking of John Alton," her ladyship goes on, "I want to ask you something. Do you remember the first time I saw you and him together—in the garden gathering roses, you know?"

Maja sighs, and casts down her eyes in silence, but gravely nods an admission of recollection.

"And you and I had a bit of a quarrel about him when you came up to your room, and I was teasing you about him—you were not a bit in love with him then. You made fun of him, and his old father, and cross old housekeeper, you remember, and said—" But here Lady Dorothea stops short, her companion suddenly withdrawing her hand, and turning aside to hide a shower of irrepressible tears.

"Why, what is the matter? Oh, how sorry I am! I never thought you would feel bad about it. I really didn't know you cared so very, very much for him, Maja," her ladyship adds, in a tone of heartfelt concern; and this speech sends a new pang to Marjorie's heart.

"Ah, but I do," protests the fair penitent, wheeling round and looking through her still falling tears into her companion's face; "and I remember it all too well, and I hate myself—yes, hate myself, Lady Dorothea, and deserve that everybody should hate me for daring to laugh at a man so high above me in every way. I should like to fall on my knees and ask his pardon at this very moment."

"It must feel queer to be in love," says her ladyship, making her yellow head in a meditative, awed way; and then she puts her arms round Maja and kisses her, and there is a great reconciliation scene.

After this they both sit down, and Maja falls to teaching Lady Dorothea a new stitch in Berlin wool-work, while in the mental efforts requisite to its comprehension that young lady forgets to marvel over the wonderful change which seems creeping over Marjorie, now that she has found a real lover.

By-and-by Lady Dorothea lifts her head and, dropping her work in her lap, surveys her companion, a sunny smile irradiating her blonde, petite face.

"Guess my thoughts, Maja," she says, with a rippling little laugh; and, holding her head on one side, she throws a queer, comical glance at her, as, interrupted in a grave reverie, she raises absent, thoughtful eyes.

"It is an awfully silly one," her friend continues, deprecatingly. "I was thinking how nicely we could start that game we used to play at on wet days when we were children—I love my love, and an adjective, you know."

"How?" asks Maja, looking good-humoredly quizzical, as she stands by her chair examining the dropped work.

"I'll show you how. 'I love my love with an A, because he is Alton.'"

"But Alton isn't an adjective, you goose; you must give an adjective. I beg your pardon for calling your ladyship a goose, though," she adds, with a laughing, apologetic bow.

"Ah," sighs her friend, "it isn't an adjective, of course; I forgot that. However, I can give you an adjective," she goes on, after a momentary crestfallen pause. "'I love my love with an A, because he is amiable.' He is so good, you know. That would be quite an appropriate one." And nodding a challenge to improve upon that brilliant idea, she betakes herself to her wool-work again.

She is certainly silly; but who likes familiar friends a whit the less for being silly? Nobody whose love is worth caring for. "Why, Lady Dorothea, you are too sharp for me," Maja laughs, and her ladyship notices no satire in her voice or look.

"Still," Marjorie proceeds, after a little silence, during which her companion has been busy counting her stitches, "I don't know that he is more amiable than thousands of other people; indeed, I don't know that he is amiable at all in the accepted sense of the word. You see, it is this way with him"—and she fixes a thoughtful gaze on the carpet and speaks slowly, as if inwardly weighing each word—"he feels kindly towards all the world, but he loves only a few people; and when he does love he takes you into that great deep heart of his forever." And her voice falls to a solemn, tremulous whisper as she ends.

"Whether you do right or wrong?" questions her ladyship, staring hard at her unwontedly solemn companion, whom she perceives to be speaking more to herself than to her.

"Whether you do right or wrong, I do believe," echoes Marjorie, still very earnestly. "I think it is because he can see so deep down into your heart and understand the springs of your actions. I think he only loves you the better because he is so sorry for you when you yield to your worse self."

"Have we two selves?" asks Lady Dorothea, opening her blue eyes wider than ever. Her head begins to ache with the mental labor Marjorie's startling psychological talk entails.

She draws a long, tired sigh as she speaks; and her nurse, noticing this, quickly changes her mood.

"I have. I am quite sure you have not. You have only one—a good one, dear Lady Dolly," she says, looking at her with a smile of approving affection.

"If you have a bad one, I have never found it out, and I can only know the half of you, then," says her ladyship, looking rueful under this supposition.

"I don't know much more than the half of myself yet, to tell you the real truth, Lady Dorothea. Nobody knows me quite but one man; and when I want to find out about myself I need to go to him. Isn't that queer?" And she laughs and sighs at the same moment.

"You have grown extremely queer altogether since you got engaged, Maja. I do wish John Alton had been just a little different from what he is, so that you need not have changed through being constantly under his influence. If he had been something like Herbert, now—just easy-going and good-natured, and generally nice and lovable, without being so very deep and wise and all that—it would have been more comfortable for you now, would it not?" And she looks scrutinizingly at her.

"No," says Marjorie, stoutly, "it would not—at least, I don't care about being comfortable in comparison with other things. I don't want him changed in the least little particular. I don't like your easy-going, pliant men whom you can't lean upon. A man should be able to stand like a rock in the midst of a very sea of temptations, and John Alton is that sort of a man. I despise weakness in a man, although I am conscious of being a good deal of a weathercock character myself."

She had been speaking with a vehemence of which she now felt ashamed, and she hastened to change the subject.

"See how the sun shines. We shall have a delightful drive in the park, won't we?" she observes, with a glance out at the nearest window; but Lady Dorothea, who is the most faithfully affectionate of sisters, is decidedly hurt by her implied condemnation of Lord Castleton; and without answering this appeal, she says, with unprecedented displeasure of aspect.

"You mean that you despise my brother. That is very plainly to be seen from such a speech as you have just made."

She holds her head an inch higher than is her wont, and fixes her eyes on the offender, who, crimsoning suspiciously, drops hers.

During the whole of this interview Maja has been inwardly comparing her quasi-aristocratic lover with her betrothed, greatly to the advantage of the latter; and the fact that, in spite of this she is conscious of a foolish longing to look on Lord Castleton's handsome, good humored, fair face just once more, to slip her hand into his, and looking up into his eyes, whisper a harmless word or two of friendly farewell, makes her the more vehement in upholding John Alton's superiority of nature and declaring her allegiance to him.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Dorothea; I was speaking of nobody in particular. I hope I know my duty to your ladyship's honorable house too well to admit of any failure of respect in speaking of Lord Castleton or any member of the family," she says, with her grand air of graceful humility; and Lady Dorothea feels snubbed, and yet sees no definite ground for complaint. With a sigh, she succumbs.

"Oh, girl, don't be so quarrelsome, when I am so glad to have you beside me! You can't think how I have wearied for you," she says, sweetly, holding up her ap-

ple-blossom of a face to be kissed, and peace presently reigns in the apartment.

Lady Dorothea's convalescence has decidedly set in, though she is weak and unable for much exertion. The doctor has pronounced her able to take a daily airing, and the two girls drive out regularly, Jackson acting as duenna except on the rare occasions that Lady Castleton accompanies them. They have new novels *ad libitum*. There is nothing they are obliged to do, and they are both gifted with a natural faculty of enjoying idleness. There are two *trousseaux* to talk about and two incidental marriage ceremonies, besides Lady Dorothea's impending presentation at court, and subsequent rush into fashionable gayeties. In short, they are in a girl's paradise, and we must not be hard in our judgment of pretty Maja, although for the first few days of her exciting London visit, her thoughts do not very often revert to the peaceful rural spot where her betrothed and her parents are thinking of her with the incomparable fidelity of those whose daily life is uneventful.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GHOST OF LOVE.

LORD CASTLETON arrived from London, and for several successive days came to the house regularly, yet without having an opportunity of speaking with any freedom to Marjorie, who carefully avoided being left alone with him, and was remarkably reserved in her manner.

She found excuses for absenting herself when he made his calls; she persistently declined the honor of making a third in the drives which the brother and sister took together; she surprised everybody by becoming quite a stickler for the proprieties, so shamefully neglected by this independent, odd, self-indulgent family.

Her conduct as an engaged young lady was quite irreproachable; and the countess, who had greatly inconvenienced herself to keep guard over her pretty, humble *protégée*, soon came to the comfortable conclusion that she was very well able to take care of herself.

Meanwhile the earl's half-smothered passion reasserted itself with a vehemence which Marjorie's apparent indifference only served to increase.

Once more he forgot his resolve to be faithful to the loving girl whom a few weeks more were to make his wife, and chafed in the fetters of his engagement.

If only he had been free, he thought, he would have found means to carry out his will. It could not be that Maja would refuse to fling overboard her duty to her humble betrothed. No girl could be expected to sacrifice her own interests so cruelly.

We must not suppose that the young earl was not intently tormented during many a quiet moment by a consciousness that in thus thinking he was guilty of unmanly breach of faith. He despised himself as he had seldom found occasion to do in his life, but he had not strength of will to overmaster his love for this bewitching maid, whose charms had taken such hold of his fancy.

He had long been accustomed to have his own way in all material points. His nature was kindly and docile; and as fortune had surrounded his youth with a preponderance of good influences, this license on his had not been attended with much apparent danger. Yet, when habits of self-denial have never been cultivated, mortals are very apt to become the sport of circumstances.

As he very well knew, his safety now lay in flight; yet, though with no conscious intention of taking any decided step towards the attainment of his longings, he continued to hang idly about the house which held Marjorie, and she was not long left to entertain the belief that his once fervent admiration had cooled down to safe indifference.

"Why do you always run away from me? Don't you see how wretched it makes me? Stay, now, and tell me in plain words. I shan't be surprised though you have learned to dislike me utterly, only it would be far better that you should say it out."

So he suddenly addressed her one morning he was ushered in, as she sat alone in the small drawing-room.

She was seated at the piano, which was littered with music familiar to them both in their thoughtless, merry, flirting days, now as remote as if they had belonged to a previous existence. Songs they had sung together when nobody but unnoticed Lady Dorothea was by—deliciously dreamy melodies she had played to him alone, though the great drawing-room at Torwood House was filled with distinguished guests, for whose entertainment the countess had sent her to the piano. She had been fitfully trying them over, and pausing to recall the sensations they used to awaken; so there is little wonder that at the moment the earl made his sudden and eager appeal she had drifted back into her dreams once more.

"He was very fond of me once, and so was I of him. How could I help it, poor handsome fellow? I wonder whether I should have been Countess of Castleton by this time, instead of simple Maja Bruce, supposing there had been no Miss Lisle and no John Alton! There have been gipsy countesses before now," she was musing; and then he stood before her as, fancying she had heard Lady Dorothea come in, she wheeled round on the music-stool.

He was holding out his hand and looking deprecatingly at her, his face full of eagerness. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice had a pathetic unsteadiness. And he was the Earl of Castleton, and had condescended to be her gay, familiar *crony* in the bright, careless days that were dead and buried in the irrevocable past.

"Ah! Lord Castleton," she says, softly, yet with impetuosity, "you know me better than to suppose I really want to avoid you." And she put her hand in his, and upturned her lovely dark eyes, full of eloquent, pathetic reproach.

"Why do you do it, then?" he asks, rather crossly, yet holding her hand tightly clasped between his; and Maja blushes and sighs involuntarily as she gently withdraws it.

"I do it because it is the proper thing to do, Lord Castleton; is not that the reason which prompts half the doings of civilized life?" she says, trying to be playful, though she feels an immense compassion for this blundering, unhappy young earl, who stands frowning down upon her, a stray sunbeam frolicking about the fair yellow-tinted beard she used to admire in her silly, girlish days, lighting up the great diamond on the well-shaped, sun-browned hand, which is absently stroking this hirsute glory.

"Oh, bother propriety!" he cries, with something between a sigh and a groan. "Can't you just be natural and kind and friendly, as you used to be, for a little while more?"

"Till we are both married, you mean," laughs Miss Maja, softly, sinking down upon the music-stool again; and, folding her arms upon her bosom, she steals a half-sad, half-quizzical look at him.

"Oh, bother being married, Maja! Why will you not give up tormenting me?" he says again, with another impatient sigh, and then he begins tossing over the music on the piano. His face betrays the recollections this occupation summons up, so that his next speech does not take her by surprise.

"You remember those days sometimes, don't you?" And he looks down at her with a keen, observant glance, which has the effect of putting her on her guard at once.

"Often, Lord Castleton," she responds, the roses in her cheeks deepening in spite of the affectedly innocent air with which she uplifts her eyes. "They were very happy, pleasant days. I hope I shall remember them as long as I live, and speak of them when I am quite a female Methuselah."

It was difficult to corner Marjorie Bruce. If her pride was up in arms, as on the present occasion, she was fertile in resources.

The earl was no match for her in this respect. Wondering whether it could really be that she had already forgotten what made the chief charm of this by-gone season of bright days, he tried her again.

"Maja, do you think people are ever so happy as just when they are building their youthful air-castles? I don't."

Marjorie smiles, and thinks, with a spice of self-conceit, that she is well qualified to judge of this matter.

"I do, Lord Castleton. I know by experience that advancing life has its compensations," she says, with the air of a wisacre; and she nods her pretty head at him.

"What are they, I wonder, Mrs. Methuselah?" questions the earl, staring hard at her in a half-sorrowful, half-amused way; and Mrs. Methuselah casts down her eyes and speaks oracularly.

"Well, one learns to know one's self and other people, and what a moderate share of happiness this world at the best can afford; and so one is not kept in a fever of hopes and fears, and has leisure to seek out real duties. It seems to me, judging by my own experience, that true enjoyment of life is not possible until all this is found out."

"Saul among the prophets!" laughs the young man, a little bitterly. "How wise and sensible you have grown since I used to know you!"

"Oh, that is an age ago. I was only a child then, Lord Castleton." And the graceful head is thrown up with some hauteur.

"A child then, just a few months ago! If so, you are a child now, and don't in the least understand what you are talking about with a middle-aged air of experience."

He is very unhappy, and consequently very irritable, and her philosophical mood annoys him. How is it that she has attained this vantage-ground, while he is still floundering about in a mire of temptations? Probably because her heart, incapable of maintaining a passionate love, has comforted itself by the substitution of a correct affection for this young farmer whom her parents have looked out for her as a suitable husband.

"People ought not to count their ages by years, I often think, Lord Castleton. Sometimes one lives more in a month than in a number of years, I think," she remarks, still sagely; then, afraid lest she has admitted too much, she changes the subject.

"I wonder what has become of Lady Dorothea? She went away to dress for going out with you ever so long ago. If you will excuse me, I'll let her know that you are here," she adds; but his lordship stops her as she is rising to leave the room.

"Don't run away; think how long it is since I have had you to talk to—how soon it is all going to end. Let us be friends, as you promised we should be that day in the wood, long ago, Maja." And he heaves another great sigh and stretches out an eager hand to her, just as if there was no Miss Lisle to claim it.

"Yes, friends, of course, Lord Castleton." She begins to grow afraid of his fervor, although she is too sorry for his evident unhappiness to be as resolutely distant as she ought. "We have never been anything else, I am sure," is the rather unlucky addition she presently makes to this reassuring reply.

The earl's handsome face flushes as he looks down at her, and he breaks out into passionate speech.

"If we have not, the fault lies with you. We might have been something else, and I would have been a deal better and happier a man if we had been something else."

"If you thought so, you acted in a very remarkable way. Why did you stay away from the Hunt Ball? Why were you so careful to let me see that you wished me to forget you? You know perfectly well that you have yourself to blame for all that has happened since," retorts Marjorie, growing quite pale; then, keenly vexed that she has given vent to this speech,

she tries to counteract its effect by another of a very different order.

"However," she says, forcing a smile, "I have no doubt it was all for the best. Indeed, I am quite sure you acted rightly, and I think, on the whole, so have I, in the end." And he knows that she means, "when I engage myself to John Alton."

"Rightly or wrongly, I regret it now, Maja—my share of the right-doing or wrong-doing," and he laughs a reckless, uneasy laugh which does not sound like his. "It is your turn to confess."

There is a great hunger in the passion-lighted eyes which are eagerly scanning her pretty, troubled face, and a thrill of mingled fear and pity sets her trembling from head to foot.

"I have nothing to confess. I am very happy, now that it is all over between you and me. Why do you torment me? Why can't you let me alone? I love John Alton dearly; he is the best and noblest man in the world, and he loves me a thousand times more than I deserve." And the girl's bosom heaves ominously.

"And you care for nobody but him now?" asked the earl, drawing a step nearer her and lowering his voice to a tone of imploring inquiry.

"Nobody—not as you mean. How dare you ask such a question? Why will you come here and spoil my peace and his, just when I have begun to be happy and—a little good?" says Maja, with an irrepressible burst of tears; and she looks up at him with unfamiliar great eyes and a strange, terrified expression in her white, sorrow-stricken face.

There is a tumult of conflicting emotions within that impulsive young heart, from whose unsuspected depths there has risen a terrifying ghost of a passionate love.

She is sure it is only a ghost, but it is a misery to know that it is there, in the bosom she had meant to be a pure shrine wherein should burn perpetually a heaven-fed flame of grateful, reverent love for the good man who, with such brave faith in her better nature, had chosen her for his wife.

As she stands, motionless with bewilderment, Lord Castleton seizes her chill hand and makes another appeal, though he is scarcely aware what he is saying or doing just at that moment.

"You love me, Maja. You have no right to marry another man. You belong to me, and you can't help yourself. You must be my wife."

It seems to the poor little maid as if her good angel and her bad are alternately prompting her through the feelings his words awaken. She cannot speak for a few moments, but keeps nervously twisting her tiny hands, again withdrawn from his clasp; then there is another outburst.

"You are nothing to me now. You were never anything to me since I found out your real nature—ever so long ago. I don't love you, I don't even like you. I am going to marry John Alton because I love him and respect him as I never did you—no, never, never!" And there falls a second shower of angry tears, while she presses her quivering lips together to keep down a sob.

"Don't lie!" says the earl, still unconscious of what he is about, and he speaks in an eager hurry of excitement. "I am determined there shall be no more shilly-shallying. My mind is made up, and you have only to trust to me."

"I have told you that I want to be let alone! Let me go, and never speak so to me again, Lord Castleton!" Marjorie responds, struggling to free her hand, which he has once more grasped.

"Not for a moment—I'll let you go when you tell me you will trust to me."

Marjorie's temper is fairly roused, and her retort is very sharp.

"Trust to you, Lord Castleton!" she says, with scornful emphasis. "Trust to you!" And there are lightning gleams in the dark eyes out of which she is dashing her despised tears.

Nobody has ever said such a cruel thing to him in all the course of his prosperous, beflattered life. He grows quite pale, and a grave pain darkens his face, which he presently hides in his hands, turning away from the girl, and leaning on the high piano by which they stand.

The sting of her words lies in his consciousness of the justice of this half-spoken taunt. He has shown himself fickle, unfaithful, shamelessly unmindful of duty, and he is capable of better things. The good within him makes him writhe in an agony of remorseful shame.

For a full minute Maja stands apart in wrathful silence; then her heart gives a great throb of repentant tenderness, and she steals up to him, and lays a timidly caressing hand on his arm, saying softly, with a sob interrupting her words: "Oh, how sorry I am! If you only knew how sorry I am, you would forgive me, Lord Castleton."

Her touch of his coat-sleeve sends an electric thrill through his whole frame. He looks up and confronts her little white, wee-begone face, down which great bright tears are streaming, as she stands craving his pardon.

"I suppose you thought there couldn't be any harm in speaking truth, Maja. Only you were rather hard on me," the earl says, with a rueful attempt to smile; and Maja sees that she is forgiven, and grows doubly penitent.

"I am sorry," she repeats; "very sorry."

"I shouldn't mind a bit, if it wasn't that I know I don't deserve to be trusted. There's where the sting lies, Maja."

"It isn't true, and I do like you; indeed I do, Lord Castleton; only not in the way you mean—because"—And here, as ill-luck will have it, she breaks off, cringing under his passionately loving gaze, and, with all the eloquence of a broken utterance, she has quite unconsciously convinced him that her heart belies her words.

"Because you are engaged to be married, you would say, Maja," he begins. Then they hear Lady Dorothea opening the door, and make haste to draw a little apart and look as innocent as it is possible to do on such short notice.

Lady Dorothea has a grievance, and is fortunately even blinder than usual.

A French hair-dresser and Jackson have been laying their wise heads together over a new style of dressing her ladyship's yellow locks, and dire have her sufferings been under their hands. Everybody seems combining to make her look upon her approaching presentation as if it was to be her execution, she piteously declares; and there are tears of real vexation in her lazy blue eyes, though she musters up a faint smile when her brother kisses her and asks if she is ready for her drive.

"Quite, old boy," she answers; then appeals to Marjorie.

"You might come with me to-day, Maja. Think how soon you go home, and how little I'll see of you forever so long. Do come, like a good, kind nurse as you are!"

"Ah, do, just to please Dolly. She is not quite herself yet, poor girl. See how her roses have faded, just from those wretches pulling about her poor little head so," Lord Castleton pleads, looking over the said yellow head as its owner sits on his knee, lovingly stroking his sweeping silky beard; and Maja yields to their combined entreaties and runs away to get ready.

"I shall put a stop to this folly to-morrow, and go home in a very few days after. That will open his eyes to how little I care for him more effectually than anything I could do or say. Besides, I never manage to say exactly what I wish when his eyes are on my face. I am so sorry for him that I lose my head, and give him utterly false impressions of my real feelings."

"Yes, I am sorry for him, and I like him for the sake of old days; and I have a silly admiration of his good looks and high rank. Besides, I am flattered because he finds it so hard to break away from me, and my greed and vanity keep crying out for the coronet he will dangle before my eyes. That is just how I feel, and I shall tell him so plainly to-morrow. To-day I shall be cool and civil, and act as if he had not forgotten himself so."

This is the substance of Marjorie's reflections as she makes her toilet for going out. When it is finished she tries a final sedative, which previous experience has seldom found to fail.

She draws from her neck a simple, little gold locket, wherein is enshrined a wonderfully faithful portrait of her betrothed, and, opening it, gazes into his gravely smiling eyes; then, kissing it penitently, whispers, with a sudden shower of bright tears raining over the miniature, "I am sorry, dear John, and I love you—nobody but you—and will be true to you as long as I live." After which comforting penance she feels able to face her waiting friends with a tolerably bright face.

The sun shines out gloriously. There is a delicious spring freshness in the air. All the fashionable world is abroad beneath the clear, blue sky.

There is mettle in the horses' heels, and the carriage flies on at an exhilarating pace until it reaches Hyde Park, and a new excitement is to be found in watching the gay kaleidoscopic scene. Marjorie forgets to measure out her smiles, and grows her happy self again. Her dark eyes gleam, her cheeks glow, while Lord Castleton and Lady Dorothea rejoice in a certain pride of proprietorship in his fresh brunette beauty, upon whom so many admiring looks are lavished.

"There have been lovesick fools before me, and will be while the world wags," thinks the young man, meditating his desertion of Ernestine Lisle, his many coming sacrifices, even while a stanza of feverish passion keeps dinning itself on his inward ear as he looks at the pretty maid opposite:

"A man might give all earthly bliss,
And all his hopes of heaven, for this:
To waste his whole life in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CHANGES.

"How much of all this do you really mean? You women are such hypocrites, that I shouldn't be surprised though not a word you have said comes from your heart," Lord Castleton says, rather scoffingly.

"I mean it all, however, Lord Castleton. If your lordship has grown so accustomed to flattery that you can't believe an unpalatable truth, I can't help it. Honesty is better than politeness, any day," replies Marjorie Bruce, with an air of severe virtue, which strikes him as being simply ill-tempered.

They are in a little conservatory adjoining Lady Dorothea's painting room, or den, as she calls the modest-sized, quaintly furnished apartment, with its picturesque litter of artistic properties. The artist has been called away to try on a quantity of finery which a milliner has just sent home, and Maja has seized the opportunity of speaking her mind to Lord Castleton, who has been even more persistent in making love to her, during the last couple of days, than on the previously recorded occasion.

When Maja speaks her mind she generally does so with quite an Oriental contempt for accuracy of statement, and on the present occasion she has fairly astounded her companion by the sharpness of her attack upon him.

He is looking very pale, as, a deep frown darkening his face, he stands leaning on a jasmine-wreathed pillar; and she is looking very hot, as, a step or two withdrawn from him, she awaits, with folded arms and a proudly raised head, his promise to speak no more to her of his attachment.

"Don't you see that you positively insult me when you speak in this way?" she says, as he keeps sulky silence.

"Insult you by offering to make you my wife! I think you forget yourself a little, Miss Bruce," the earl retorts, with a good deal of haughty emphasis on the words "my wife."

"I don't care whether you think so or not. When you come to me, who am engaged to marry another man, and love him, and am very happy"—she stops to check a rising sob—"and make love to me, and ask me to marry you, you are insulting me; and although you were the Prince of Wales, instead of the Earl of Castleton, and I was a poor little servant maid, it would not alter the case one bit," cries Maja, with gradually raised voice; then, with a sudden loss of dignity, and bursting into girlish tears, she adds: "Now, I have no more to say to you. Will you please to let me go away? Oh, how I do wish you had not come home!"

With all the good will in the world the earl comes down from his stilts. He mounts them so seldom that we need not wonder he finds them of little service.

"My dear little Maja," he says, "I beg your pardon ten thousand times. You are quite right to feel as you do, and I respect you ever so much for doing so, only you must listen to reason. An engagement is not like a marriage. It ought to be broken when those who have made it find that there is no reasonable chance of happiness if it is carried through."

"John Alton has not found that out yet, nor I either, nor yet Miss Lisle—only you: and you know you would never for a moment have dreamed of marrying me if I had not, unluckily, happened to be—a little—pretty," interrupts the girl through her tears; and he cannot help smiling, though, afraid of her wrath, he bites his lip hard.

He is perfectly sure of her, although he anticipates a good deal of preliminary trouble. She has risen prodigiously in his estimation ever since he has discovered that their courtship is likely to be a stormy one, owing to her scruples. There is something of that security in the good-humored tone in which he defends himself from her last accusation.

"If you had not been a little—to be honest, since at present we have quite thrown off the fetters of politeness—more than a little—very pretty—you would not have been yourself at all, Maja—Miss Bruce, I mean—so we need not argue that point, anyhow."

Though he keeps his lips sternly set, there is the irrepressible old gleam of diversion in his blue eyes, which are bent upon her with a look of deprecation.

It is hard for him to be long serious: and the greater has been his depression of spirits, the more imperative is his revulsion to gayety, for the almost uninterrupted good fortune which has attended him through life has left him in unimpaired enjoyment of that most enviable endowment, natural high spirits.

Marjorie's face does not respond to his brightening look, but remains cross and troubled.

"I am not trifling in the least, and I am only a foolish girl. I do wonder a man can care to talk nonsense when the happiness of other people's lives is at stake. Suppose somebody overheard you speak as you have been doing to me: suppose Lady Castleton or even Lady Dorothea should come in and discover me with such eyes"—she impatiently brushes away a tear which has been exciting his admiration as it clung like a glistening dewdrop to her sweeping, curled eyelash—"what should I do? what could I say? They would think me the most deceitful, plotting, ungrateful girl alive."

"Not when I had explained everything, which I should instantly do. I don't care how soon they know that I want to marry you. Ah! Maja, I am not trifling. Be kind to me: tell me that I may arrange matters so as to get you for my very own. It is not too late; yet it will be soon, if you go on being so obstinate."

Marjorie heaves a long sigh of weariness, and uplifts really earnest eyes to his, which are eagerly bent on her face.

"I am engaged to John Alton, and I love him, and wish to marry him. Can't you believe me when I tell you so gravely? Look, there is my hand on it." And she extends a stern little hand, which he declines to notice.

"You are an unforgiving, hard-hearted girl," says the gentleman, angry at last. "Indeed, I don't believe you have a bit of heart," he adds, with wrathful inconsistency of statement.

"I have, though, but not for you, Lord Castleton," is Miss Bruce's equally rude retort. Then she makes a fierce little bow, and sweeps off without so much as throwing him one backward glance; nor does she reappear while he is in the house, though, in hope of her relenting, he hangs about until even Lady Dorothea grows a little weary of him; and her patience is not easily exhausted.

Her ladyship announces that Marjorie has a bad headache, and they drive out alone, finding each other but dull company. When the young lady is safely deposited at the hall-door, her brother excuses himself and drives off to his club, where he lounges away a few unhappy, meditative hours, the result of which is a desperate and hitherto undreamed-of resolution.

Marjorie is timid, overawed by the dread of his family's censure, unwilling to pain this highly worthy betrothed of hers by giving him his *conge*. He will give up all hope of getting her to take the initiative, and frankly tell the poor fellow himself how matters stand. He will inform him of his own honorable intentions, and his belief that Marjorie would with gratitude accept her freedom if he, Mr. John Alton, would generously offer to break their hurriedly formed engagement.

"It is a deal to ask, of course; but then I should do all I could to show my sense of obligation—lend him money to work another farm—make him factor when I saw my opportunity—do anything of that sort; and a sensible fellow with his hands full of work does not break his heart for the loss of a sweetheart. Besides, what man in his position could expect a girl to marry him when it is in her power to marry me?"

Such are the earl's views of the matter before dinner. After it, and a prolonged jolly sitting over his wine in company with a few Bohemian-spirited chums, he is even more determined to secure the little beauty, at whatever cost of social prestige or pecuniary sacrifice.

Before he goes to bed he has dashed off and dispatched by post a very frank statement of the case to John Alton, Esq., Torwood Downs, by D—, Scotland.

He has a headache next morning. It rains, and his spirits are depressed. He is by no means sure that he does not regret having acted with such unwonted decision; but the letter has gone beyond recall, and he feels bound to await an answer and shape his future course by it. He is haunted by thoughts of his betrothed, who is expected in London within a day or two, and to whom he owes a most painful and humiliating confession of this final desertion of her. So unhappy is he that he cannot face the fair cause of all this troubled cogitation, and an affectionate scrawl informs Lady Dorothea that engagements out of town will prevent his coming to the house that day.

And so it comes about that the feeble old letter-carrier of the Torwood district delivers at the Downs an aristocratic-looking missive such as rarely finds its way to the quiet folks there.

"Twa gran' Lunnon letters the day, Maister John!" he proclaims, with an air of consequence, as that gentleman comes forward to the hall-door, where he is holding a leisurely colloquy with Nancy; and Mr. John's dark face lights up as he takes them and goes off to devour them in solitude, a slightly disappointed look following his discovery that only one letter is from Marjorie.

With a mere glance at the crested envelope addressed in Lord Castleton's unknown handwriting, he proceeds to open that which bears Miss Bruce's undecipherably pretty monogram, designed by no less distinguished an artist than Lady Dorothea.

Until he knows that his darling is well and happy he has no curiosity about anything else.

And she is well—as well as he could wish; but happy—no. She is restless; she misses him, the dear old folk, her country rides and walks, their long confabs—all that she has learned to prize so fondly during the last peaceful month.

She thinks she is homesick, and is determined to make her visit a short one. She gives him rather a vague sketch of the manner in which her days pass, sends a pretty, loving message to his father, and is forever and ever, her dear old John's "loving Maja."

And then there is a postscript; "Lord Castleton has come home. I don't think I mentioned that last time I wrote to you. He is staying at his club, but he often calls here. I dare say the D— paper will have informed you of his arrival from Paris. When he comes the amateur nurse sometimes finds an opportunity to slip away and write her love-letters; so you see, he is unconsciously useful to her and somebody else. Good-bye, and God bless the best man in all this world, prays his own Maja."

John Alton's face grows very grave as he reads this postscript, and his hand is several times passed over his forehead, as if to clear away some painful thought which oppresses his brain.

Yet he has no fault to find with the writer, for even while he sighs he kisses her big scrawling signature; and when, after a second meditative perusal, he lays the letter down, he murmurs a tender "God bless her!"

Only he cannot help wishing she did not feel restless, and that he could convince himself of that postscript being a perfectly unstudied one—such as her little hand was wont to dash off.

As he breaks the seal of his lordship's letter, a stern look settles on his face. Why should he write to him? He wants none of his patronage, his compliments, his condescending friendliness, which have made him such a favorite among his tenantry. Whatever he has to communicate might surely be done through the factor of his estates, with whom alone John Alton has been accustomed to deal.

Thus thinking, he has absently read a few lines without comprehending their purport. Marjorie's name presently occurs, startling him into attention, and a very few minutes suffice to acquaint him with his lordship's surmises, and promises and requests, and to stir up within his bosom the fiercest conflict of passions it has ever known in all his thirty years of life.

The young man is alone in his little library, a plainly furnished, book-filled apartment to the front of the house. On the other side of the narrow hall is the parlor, where at this hour his father is accustomed to sit looking over the newspaper which the letter-carrier brings out from D—. Fearing lest the old man should seek him, he softly locks the library door; then, throwing himself wearily into a chair, buries his face in his hands and determinedly thinks it all out.

By-and-by there is a knock at his door, but he takes no notice of it, and the applicant for admission, a young subordinate of Nancy's, withdraws without another attempt to deliver the message old Mr. Alton has intrusted to her.

"Mr. John is among his books, an' I thoct ye would na wish him disturbed, sir," she informs her master; and telling her that he is in no particular hurry to see him, the old man sends her away and goes on with his reading, which, strange to say, is an account of the total loss of the Atlantic steamer in which the nephew of whom I have spoken had sailed from New York.

There are mingled feelings in the old man's heart, and his thin face is full of most unwonted excitement. He is not sorry to have a little time to compose his thoughts.

For if, as is reported, only a few of the crew is saved, John Alton, junior, is worth not less than sixty thousand pounds. The last letter in which his cousin intimated his departure by this vessel, intimated also

that, in grateful acknowledgment of John's previous generosity toward him, he had appointed him his sole legatee, and had no intention of altering this arrangement unless in the event of his own marriage.

And Will had settled it all in a business-like manner. He had sold his Chicago property and got his money safely invested in England. A lawyer recommended by the Altons had managed his affairs, and was prepared to give an account of every shilling. John had only to prove the death and claim his rights of succession.

Old Mr. Alton wished the poor lad safe, and he also wished his own son rich. If Will must be drowned, it was surely well that his money should come to one so certain to spend it with wise generosity, so deserving of a higher place on the social ladder.

If Will should prove not to be drowned, he trusted he could give him an honest welcome home, in spite of that tempting sixty thousand pounds. He trusted so, but that was not enough—he must make sure of it; and the feeble old man shut himself into his own room, and there, taking out a Bible dear dead hands had worn, and patient, pure eyes had mused over, quieted his heart therewith, and by-and-by crept down-stairs, prepared to reflect upon others the light which his own soul had attained.

"Does my lad care nothing for money? Is he fair beyond the reach o' temptation?"

So speaks he in a tender tone when, an hour after, the two men sit together speaking over this startling news; and his son, who has been shading his eyes with his hand, looks up and shakes his head mournfully.

"Beyond the reach of temptation," and he newly come out of a struggle so terrible that his face was blanched and his strong limbs were aching! The old eyes must indeed be grown dim, since his looks had not betrayed him, and it would be cruel to force upon them a premature revelation of the circumstances which made the loss or gain of money a matter of comparative indifference.

He had made up his mind to let his darling go. She should be a countess, since he doubted not that in her inmost heart she loved this man who was willing to make her one. She should have all the sunshine of his life offered up a sacrifice on the altar of her happiness, and her tender little heart should be spared the pain of knowing how anguished had been his resolution to set her free: to go on living year after year without the daily sweet communion, upon the mere foretaste of which he had lived in paradise during these last few weeks.

Old Mr. Alton was not, after all, unobservant of the change in his son's looks; but, attributing it to grief at the loss of his cousin, it did not surprise him. "It was but like John," thought he, "to forget everything but the sadness of this early death amidst circumstances so appalling."

When, after sitting long silent, the young man suddenly asked his father whether he had any objections to his running up to London for a couple of days, he was answered by an emphatic negative.

"You want to find out all about the wreck, you mean," Mr. Alton added, and almost for the first time in his life John gave an answer which was not altogether honest.

"Yes, father, the owners are the proper people to apply to, and I want to go to their office and learn all I can."

"Then you would go and see Marjorie, too, and sure am I the very sight o' her bonny face would cheer ye, lad," the old man went on, pleased with this prospect of the two young folks meeting.

"Yes, I would go and see her," he agreed, with a strange lack of enthusiasm in his voice which had grown suddenly husky.

Seeing his father look anxiously at him, he managed to recover his usual tone, and fell to discussing with him the necessary arrangements for this unexpected journey.

Early the following morning he set out for the great city, without giving any one a hint of his real errand thither.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BROKEN ENGAGEMENT.

"WHAT is become of Lord Castleton? You have never let him go away without seeing me, Ernestine, love?"

"Yes, Aunt Vesey, you must excuse him; he has gone."

"Why?" says Mrs. Vesey, looking decidedly angry; and her companion, Miss Marchmont, who is busy counting the stitches in a piece of tapestry-work which the former lady has handed over to her for rectification, loses her count, and begins to tremble nervously, conscious of trouble in the atmosphere, and aware that on her devoted head part of the storm will assuredly light.

"I suppose because he was obliged," answers Miss Lisle, coldly.

"When is he coming back again, my dear?" questions Mrs. Vesey, staring at her niece.

"I have not the least idea," that young lady replies, yet more coldly; and it is Mrs. Vesey's turn to be frightened now.

For not only is the heiress's manner unaccountably altered, but her face is very white and full of a grave pain, and ere she seats herself at her little work-table, in the embrasure of the bow-window near which the two ladies are sewing, she gives her aunt a meaning glance, which warns her to ask no more questions at present.

They had taken up their quarters in Mrs. Vesey's London house only the night before. A note from Miss Lisle has apprised Lord Castleton of their arrival, and his brougham has brought him to the door early in the forenoon. The engaged couple have been alone together for the last hour, and now the bride to be comes in, looking like her own ghost, and announces his departure in this startlingly brusque fashion.

A lovers' quarrel, perhaps; but then they were scarcely lovers, and not at all given to quarreling. A breaking-off of their engagement; but that was simply impossible, now that all the marriage arrangements were made and everybody was aware of them.

And there sits that stupid Miss Marchmont, so intent upon counting her tiresome stitches that she cannot catch her eye, and thus silently give her a hint to be off and allow her to get to the bottom of this mystery.

"I don't quite see your mistake, Mrs. Vesey, but I'll go over it all again. I think there is a stitch too many somewhere among the greens," the companion timidly observes, after there has been an uncomfortable silence; and looking up as she speaks she receives her signal of dismission, and presently slips out of the room.

Then Mrs. Vesey goes up to her niece's chair and caressingly puts her hand upon her shoulder, staring hard into the pale, rather stern face, which is raised towards her as its owner drops her work and prepares to be tortured.

What does it matter to her that the spring sunshine is rejoicing the earth? It is winter, cruel, barren, hopeless winter in her heart, for she has lost her dearly loved betrothed, and life has no more meaning.

Yet there she sits, in a graceful, lady-like attitude, becomingly draped by the exquisite lace curtains of the window looking out upon Hyde Park—a miracle of mauve silk and softly falling tulle ruffles—and anybody who may be ushered into the drawing-room will find her at her proper post.

"Tell me all about it, there's my dear child!" And Mrs. Vesey's voice takes that coaxing tone which, somehow or other, always makes Miss Lisle feel determinedly uncommunicative.

Smiling faintly, she holds up her left hand. "See, Aunt Vesey, I have lost a ring. Can you guess what that portends?" she says, with wonderful self-control; and Mrs. Vesey sinks down in the nearest chair and very nearly groans aloud.

The beautiful diamond ring Lord Castleton had given her long ago is gone, and language fails to convey the terror of the poor lady's soul.

"Jilted!" she gasps, laying hold of the first word which occurs to her; instead of choosing from a polite repertory, as is her wont when dealing with the troubles of people of position.

Miss Lisle smiles again yet more faintly. "No, not exactly—not at all, I dare say. I saw that Lord Castleton did not want to marry me, and I broke off our engagement. It would have been better for both of us that I had done so long ago. We parted quite good friends; and that is all I have to tell at present." And she draws along a sigh of relief at having got a painful duty over.

"Oh, my child, this is sheer madness! He must be brought back. The *trousseau*, the settlements, the facing-up of the curious, gossiping world—think of it all!" poor Mrs. Vesey goes on, gathering her breath and turning imploring, wide-opened eyes on the young lady.

"I shall wear out the *trousseau*, if I live long enough, Aunt Vesey. Hopeless old maids like me don't need to care about fashions altering. If the lawyers are paid for their trouble they won't complain. As for the world, one need not face it very often until one feels inclined."

"But, my darling, I have been looking forward so eagerly to your marriage; and the winter has been so intolerably dull, and I was so thankful to be safe in my own town house again, and imagined this season would be so delightful. I don't think you realize what an awful blow this is to me."

Mrs. Vesey's tears are streaming; and, fearful lest anybody should see her in this plight, Miss Lisle prevails upon her to dry her eyes and retire to her dressing room, where she promises to stay beside her until she feels more composed.

There the colloquy is presently resumed, a liberal drenching with eau-de-cologne going on at intervals. Finding Miss Lisle immovably fixed in her resolution, her aunt by-and-by gives up entreaty and takes to mere lamentation.

What can one do with a woman of twenty-six, self-willed to an extreme, and of independent resources, gently inflexible, too, so that one is shamed into speaking without loss of temper?

"I do believe it will end by his running off with that designing mix, Marjorie Bruce; running off with her and marrying her, very likely, for there is no limit to some young men's insatiation," the elder lady says, sighing lugubriously.

"Why should he run off with her? There are churches enough in London. He could marry her any day, I suppose," answers the younger, forcing a smile.

"Ah!" proceeds Mrs. Vesey, without noticing this query, "you must remember now how I warned you, Ernestine. Nobody can say I neglected my duty. If Lady Castleton's conscience were as clear as mine, it would be well for her now."

"Why, what has Lady Castleton done? Everybody understood that the girl was going to be married to that farmer you heard of."

"I feel pretty sure, however, that she is not going to be married to him at all," interrupts Mrs. Vesey, with a good deal of heat; and it is then that Miss Lisle administers the *coup-de-grace* to her poor aunt's last languishing hope.

"You are as well to know at once, Aunt Vesey, that Lord Castleton means to marry her. I am prepared for this, and quite willing it should be so."

"If there was madness in the family, I should say you were mad," cries Mrs. Vesey, sinking back in her chair and clasping her hands.

"Not at all," replies Miss Lisle. "I think the chief thing people should marry for is happiness. If Lord

Castleton has found out that he can't be happy without her, why shouldn't he please himself?"

"And he told you that?"

"Oh no, I guessed how the case stood, and told him, and he did not seek to deny it. Then we gave each other back our engagement-rings, and agreed to be friends in spite of all this, and said good-bye. *Voilà tout*," ends Miss Lisle, with a sad little laugh and a quickly smothered sigh.

"For Heaven's sake say nothing to anybody else in the meantime. Perhaps you may make it up yet, my love," Mrs. Vesey entreates, as she sees her niece about to leave the room.

"Certainly not, Aunt Vesey. I must have time to consider the least ugly way of enlightening the world. Only don't for a moment think everything is not ended between Lord Castleton and me."

"How cool she seems! And yet I thought her really fond of him. Ah, what a different heart I had when I was a girl!" is her aunt's reflection as she closes the door behind her. If she could see her in her own room a little later, she would discover how much passionate feeling underlay this surface composure.

And so, after all, Lord Castleton was spared the pain of telling his betrothed that he had at last, and without any previous consultation with her, taken advantage of her generous willingness to be thrown overboard, so as to make room for a more favored rival.

About that too hasty letter to John Alton, he decided that it was best to say nothing. A confession would be but a new insult; and, besides, it was much easier to hold his tongue.

Indeed, no one could have accused him of loquacity during that hour's interview with his cousin. He said very little, sighed a great many times, acquiesced with sad humility in the lady's views, and looked very handsome and lovable as, with a mist in his blue eyes and a huskiness in his pleasant voice, he took her chill little hand in his, and asked her pardon and thanked her for her goodness.

As he stood by her side, towering over her, the pale, plain little lady looked up with grave, brown eyes, and furtively took his portrait for her solace in the dreary, old maid's life to which she was looking forward.

In the gallery of her memory she had many varying portraits of this changeable, beloved face, but none, she thought, so precious as this.

"When he has little children of his own, I think he will teach them to love me, and I know I shall love them for his sake, and watch over them while I live, and leave them my poor money when I die. Their mother will not hinder me from seeing them very often, because she will want them to have this fortune; so, after all, it will not have been quite useless to me."

So thought Miss Lisle, as, letting her hand rest within his a few moments, she made a brave little speech of farewell; and then thinking her just a shade too much of a philosopher, he went away; and dreading lest she should break down before she had leisure to do so in undisturbed solitude, she hurried to Mrs. Vesey, in whose selfish woe she found the tonic she required.

When Lady Castleton and Lady Dorothea, in utter ignorance of anything being amiss, called, a few hours later, they found Mrs. Vesey invisible, from a headache and the over-fatigue of traveling; but Miss Lisle received them with quiet, friendly grace, skillfully evaded questions she could not answer directly, piloted the conversation through many difficulties, and succeeded in sending them away blissfully unconscious of any cause for chagrin.

Having summoned up resolution for an explanation, Lord Castleton drives to his mother's, arriving shortly after the two ladies had gone off to Mrs. Vesey's.

He draws a sigh of relief, and his gloomy brow lightens, as the hall porter informs him that both their ladyships have driven out.

"And so there is nobody at home?" he observes, reflectively, stroking his mustache.

"Nobody but Miss Bruce, my lord," the man says, rather dubiously; for whether this damsel is somebody or nobody is a matter of perplexing uncertainty to the servants of the town establishment.

It is then that the earl decides to come in and write a note to be given to Lady Castleton on her return; and bidding his brougham await him, he bounds up the staircase in a wonderful hurry, afraid, in truth, that Miss Bruce may beat a retreat ere he has time to reach the small drawing-room where he expects to find her.

He presently finds that she has not run away. She rises and greets him with a sweet little blush and shyly extended hand, as, making his proposed note-writing an excuse for his appearance on the scene, he comes up to her.

She has not seen him since their quarrel in the conservatory two days before, and she is glad to have an opportunity of correcting the unfavorable impression her shocking impudence must have created. Quite unaware of his subsequent course of action, she has her own plans formed.

In a few days more she is going home. A letter announcing this intention has that morning been despatched to rejoice the hearts of her dear rustics at Torw od. It is very likely that, except in the presence of others, she will not see Lord Castleton again. Miss Lisle has come to town, and, willing or unwilling, he will have to march up to the altar with her in a very few weeks more. Marjorie's heart is to-day full of relenting tenderness for the foolish, handsome young aristocrat who is so fond of her.

She will be kind to him for this last time. After all, he has never meant badly by her. On the contrary, he has done her the honor of pleading for her hand quite as if she had belonged to his own rank, instead of being a humble little nobody. If he has not treated Miss Lisle well, it is because he has been drawn into that unlucky engagement, and no doubt he will make amends for it all by being the kindest of husbands.

"This is Lady Dorothea's desk, and that is mine;

which will you have, Lord Castleton?" she says, going to a table and getting ready the writing materials he will require; and, in spite of herself, she blushes again as he replies, with his eyes on her sweet face, "Give me yours, Maja. We're friends once more, aren't we?" "Yes, if your lordship pleases," she says, meekly casting down her eyes, after bestowing upon him a momentary glance of contrition for the impertinence of which he had been guilty in their last interview.

He magnanimously forgives her, and feels more in love than ever.

"I can't for the life of me help calling you Maja. You don't mind it much, do you?" he presently observes, seating himself to write, and looking up at her as she lingers a moment by his side, demurely waiting to see that he has all he wants.

"No, I don't mind it at all. We have known each other so long; and besides, it is not worth while making any change now, Lord Castleton."

There is a somewhat pathetic look in her eyes, and she ends with a sigh. Lord Castleton, busy mending a quill which needs no mending, understands what that now means, and bites his lips to hide a smile.

Shall he tell her of that letter to her poor betrothed, and get the storm over at once? (He is quite prepared for a storm, which, however, will end in a sinking into his arms.) Or shall he wait till he receives an answer to his letter? He decides to let well alone, and be happy in this quiet sunny room, where pretty Maja is hovering about him with her kind little attentions, delighting him with her shyly penitent demeanor.

She begins to perceive that the writing of his note is not the only business which has brought him hither, and thinks that she has already made sufficient show of friendliness.

"Now I am going away, if you are all right, Lord Castleton," she remarks. "I shall see that her ladyship gets your note."

The young man hastily lifts his close-cropped fair head, and looks comically alarmed.

"But I am not all right; I am all wrong, on the contrary. See, I have not found a pen yet. I am making one, however, and you must stay to see it launched."

"And make its trial-trip on the paper," adds Marjorie, smiling, and drawing a step closer to him.

She thinks that, after all, he is liker his old self to-day—happier, less extravagantly demonstrative of admiration; and so long as he refrains from making love to her there can be no harm in her being civil; surely she was rude and disagreeable enough last time she was in his company.

"I think I must keep that pen as a remembrance of you, Lord Castleton. You are taking such infinite pains with it, and handling your penknife in such a bungling, aristocratic way, that it seems a shame to treat it as a mere ordinary pen," Marjorie observes, laughing her pretty low laugh, and looking half roguish and half sorrowful.

"Do sit down and wait for it, then, Maja," he says, entreatingly, rising and placing a chair for her in pretty close proximity to his own; and she does not decline to accept it.

"I am glad I have seen you to-day, because I am going away on Friday, you know," she remarks, with gentle gravity; but she is not allowed to proceed without an impatient interruption.

"I don't know anything of the sort. You never told me—nobody told me; yet I care more for your goings and comings than do all the rest of the world put together. You know that."

Marjorie really wants to stop this sort of thing, and, honestly regretting her weak soft-heartedness, she exerts herself to do so.

"Now, Lord Castleton," she says, looking very reproachful, "if you mean to speak so, I shall run away; if you mean to be sensible, I shall stay beside you as long as you want me."

"Well, I mean to be sensible—as sensible as—as the most wearisome old fogey you can think of. Only stay and talk to me, Maja; please the young gentleman, looking alarmed; and he determines to reserve his love-making for a more propitious occasion.

They discourse pleasantly enough of old times; of the D— neighborhood; of many harmless subjects, and pass half an hour very comfortably, the note being written by snatches in the intervals of conversation.

In the pleasure of looking at her, of hearing her fresh young voice uttering her simple jests and repartees, he forgets his inevitable confession; the difficulties his relatives will probably seek to put in the way of such a *mesalliance* as he is contemplating; the likelihood that John Alton may refuse to cede his claim to Marjorie's hand; the terrific sacrifice which awaits him, even supposing he carries his point and marries her.

He steps into his brougham with a bright face. Yet, alas! by the time he steps out of it, half an hour later, he is sunk in a very bad fit of the blues.

"I like him, after all, poor fellow. I am sorry I was so ill-tempered the other day. I shall keep the quill for my grand lover's sake, and think kindly of him now and then," whispers Marjorie to herself, as she tidies the pretty desk through which he has been rummaging with restless hands; and, a queer little smile hovering about her face, she touches the quill very lightly with the same pretty lips which are wont to be lovingly pressed to John Alton's miniature every time she takes a secret look into his kind, true face.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE VERY END.

"Don't cry, my dear little Maja. I understand how it has all come about, and I don't blame you or him one bit. By-and-by I'll forget all the pain"—his honest voice falters, then hurries on eagerly—"and the quite happy in my quiet way. You know until a little while ago I never expected to have you for my wife."

Thus speaks John Alton, wheeling round from the winnow at which he has been standing, and his eyes rest with pathetic tenderness on Marjorie Bruce's graceful figure.

The two are alone in the small drawing-room of Lady Castleton's town house. The girl has flung herself on a couch in an attitude of sorrow-stricken abandon, and, burying her face in its pillows, is sobbing as if her heart would break.

She makes no answer to this speech, and presently he addresses her again.

"You must not be so sorry for me, dear, for indeed I'll not be unhappy, but quite the reverse, so long as I know you are happy. There is nobody will feel such pride in your high position and such confidence in your doing your duty in it; and time is such a wonderful consoler, that I suppose some day or other I'll look back on this present trial and wonder how it seemed so hard to go through just at the time." And he bravely tries to laugh, by way of covering the huskiness of his tone.

He has seated himself by the half-reclining figure and drawn a passive, chill little hand away from the buried face. He looks at it lovingly as it lies within his big brown palm, and utters a quaint fancy which strikes him.

"See, Maja," he says, anxious to get her to compose herself, and willing to speak on any subject that will not excite her, "that little hand of yours, cradled in this great ugly paw, makes me think of a dainty sweet snow-drop resting in the newly dug-up brown earth—it takes me back to Tam and the Downs."

This little jest only draws another sob from the region of the gorgeous downy pillows in which Marjorie's graceful dark head nestles; and the young man sighs, and attempts another line of tactics.

"You will do one little thing to please me, Maja, won't you? You know I would do a great many big ones to please you."

"I'll do anything you bid me—anything in the world," responds Maja's voice, in a sad whisper, and the snow-drop of a hand clasps his firmly.

"Well, then, I bid you sit up and look at me. You aren't afraid of me, you know. It can't be that you are so silly as all that."

"No, I'm not afraid of you or anybody else: it isn't that." And with a sort of childlike obedience which the young man finds inexpressibly touching, the poor beauty sits up and raises her eyes to his face.

Her cheeks are flushed, her soft, dark-brown hair falls, a little disordered, round her pretty throat. She has not yet cried enough to redden her eyes, and there is a soft liquid depth in them which John Alton thinks he has never seen before.

"What is it, then, Maja? Is it only that you are so sorry for me?" he questions, noticing that her eyelashes are wet once more.

"Oh, John, how should I dare to be sorry for you?" is her strange reply, over which he is left to meditate, for as she speaks she rises, and, giving him a parting look which is full of heartfelt humility, she leaves the room, begging him to await her return.

It is a damp, depressing afternoon. A chill mist shrouds the outer world. Raindrops chase each other down the window-panes, and John Alton, as he stands at the old post gazing out on the unfamiliar prospect, thinks sadly that even thus dull and colorless will be the afternoon of his life.

He draws near the hearth, and, throwing himself wearily into a chair, shades his aching eyes with his hand, and falls into a dreary, musing fit, his face resolving into stern lines of pain.

He has only arrived in London late the preceding night. His morning has been devoted to the shipping-office, where he has had the newspaper accounts of the loss of the vessel fully authenticated, and has learned from the evidence of the survivors that his ill-fated cousin was among those who had perished by the swamping of an overcrowded boat just after it had been lowered from the sinking ship.

He is a rich man now. He is free to gratify the tastes which for years he has felt bound to repress. A future of independence and leisure lies before him, and lo! he turns away from his good-ortunes with shuddering aversion, and prays it to begone and give him back the kindly cousin and friend, the mere grasp of whose hand would comfort, even in an hour like this, when his heart writhes under the anticipation of parting forever from the woman who has become to him the very sunlight of existence.

He has unflinchingly gone through part of the bitter task he had assigned himself. The crucial trial is over, God be thanked! and he has not forfeited that dearly prized possession, his own self-respect.

Neither has his darling behaved unworthily, although she has not said one word against his resigning her to this noble rival.

Of what avail would the most eloquent speech have been? The poor child had tried hard to be faithful, he doubted not, only the old love had been too strong for the new, and she had seen the uselessness of struggling against the dictates of her heart.

When he told her she was free she has but gazed up into his face with a new recognition; then her eyes have overflowed; and, too much agitated to speak, she has flung herself down amidst the pillows of the couch, and let silence be her only assent to his plans for her future.

When she comes back, he will bid her a hurried farewell; then he will seek an interview with the earl, who happens to be in the house, and solemnly give into his hands the precious treasure: it costs him such suffering to resign. After that he will go home to fight out his own inward battle as best he can; to cheer his fond old father under the disappointment of Marjorie's loss; to face up their little world, and persistently strive for its exculpation of the embryo countess whom people have been looking upon as irrevocably bound to become his wife.

He has his work planned for a long time, he thinks, with a rueful attempt to smile and banish the look of pain which his face has assumed. The poor child's tender heart must not be tortured with useless consideration of his woes.

Meanwhile, Marjorie Bruce has done a very startling thing, such as she has never before attempted; walked boldly into the great drawing-room and carried off Lord Castleton from under the eyes of a little group there assembled—Lady Castleton, Lady Dorothea, and a couple of stately dowagers, who are making a call.

In the mood which then possessed her, I believe she would have walked into a den of lions without the slightest hesitation, had the gentleman she sought chanced to be in such an unlikely and uncomfortable location.

"Will you be good enough to let me speak with you alone for a very few minutes, Lord Castleton?"

This is the bomb-shell which breaks the tedium of a very dull, soporific afternoon, and makes everybody curious to know what on earth the pretty plebeian means by her audacity.

It is not merely the words of her speech that are audacious; it is the tone of restrained passion, the accompanying glance of something very like contemptuous command.

She goes straight up to the earl and speaks with emphatic distinctness, so that in the pause which follows her unexpected entry every syllable is heard by everybody in the room, as they happen to be grouped round the upper hearth.

Her cheeks are flushed and her lips firmly set; her hair is a little disordered, and a decided frown knits her forehead. It would be hard to imagine a humble protégée of a more unconventional type; and even Lady Castleton, radically inclined as she is, feels decidedly annoyed, and bestows a haughty stare on her favorite; while poor Lady Dorothea, vaguely conscious of trouble in the atmosphere, looks from one to another with an aspect of fright and mystification combined.

It is all lost upon Miss Bruce, whose mind is so completely filled with one thought that she is sublimely indifferent to what her aristocratic friends think of her. She is out of herself for the time being, and the presence of her gracious majesty Queen Victoria would not embarrass her in the very least degree.

"It is easy to see that she comes of a good old stock. The gentle blood of generations of Bruces of Bruce Hall is boiling in the pretty Amazon's veins now," thinks Lord Castleton, as, thus addressed, he rises, saying, "Certainly, Miss Bruce," and doing his best to look as if there was nothing remarkable in this summons.

The tug of war has come, and he has been so terribly bored by the entrance of these two old ladies just when he was on the point of making his confession to Lady Castleton that this excitement is not unwelcome.

He knows that Marjorie has been with her betrothed, whose promptitude of appearance on the scene has quite thrown him out in his calculations. He supposes that the young man has refused to be quietly sacrificed, and that the girl proposes to stick to her engagement.

For his own part, he is prepared for tears, reproaches, declarations of hatred, and determination never to forgive him; then a final collapse, which will be the signal for a general resolving into action of all those chaotic plans that have of late been making his nights sleepless.

Of course she will give up John Alton; and he feels really sorry for the poor fellow, who must certainly be fond of her, when he marches so boldly into the enemy's ground upon such a hopeless errand. He is not at all rich, but he would willingly give a year's income to console him.

Thus thinks the earl as he follows frowning Marjorie to the library which communicates with the drawing-rooms. Could he read her heart, his thoughts would undergo a wonderful transmutation.

He shuts all the doors carefully, then comes up to her as she stands by the fire, awaiting him in stern silence, her slender figure drawn up to its fullest height, and a very stormy look on her face.

"Sit down, Maja, and I'll tell you all about it," he begins, placing a chair for her; but she declines it with a naughty gesture, and plunges hastily into action.

"I want to ask you something, Lord Castleton. A word or two will answer me; then you can go away, and I shall trouble you no more," she says, speaking low, and with a tremble of restrained wrath in her voice. "Have you in any way communicated to John Alton your belief that I want him to free me from my engagement, so that I may marry you?"

For one moment the earl hesitates, meditating an indirect reply. In that brief space the haunting ghost of a love is laid for evermore.

"Have you or have you not?" And Marjorie's teeth clench and her eyes dart lightnings of scorn.

Lord Castleton grows a little pale, and begins to perceive that it is possible he has not fully sounded the depths and the shallows of the pretty damsel's nature.

"Yes, I have, Marjorie; but—"

"You wrote that to him!" she interrupts, still in that low, fierce voice.

"Something of the sort. Not by any means so bluntly as you put it, but—"

An imperious gesture stops his explanation. "Why did you tell him such a lie—such a cruel, cruel lie?" And her fair bosom heaves with a suppressed sob.

Ignoring her accusation, which he believes prompted by the wrath of the moment, he makes another attempt to soothe her by an explanation.

"It is only natural that Mr. Alton should object to give you up," he begins, and is for the third time interrupted, this time in a way which sends a keen pang of fear to his heart.

"But he does not object. He consents fully. He does more—he urges me to marry you. He has not a

word of reproach for me—for you. Do not for a moment think that he would interfere with your wishes."

Her face has lost its angry look, and grown suddenly light with an admiring wonder akin to worship. Her voice thrills, her eyes fill, and he knows that a critical moment of his life has come.

Drawing a step nearer, the earl stretches out his hand to her in an uncontrollable yearning for her love.

"Forgive me, Maja," he pleads. "I know that I ought to have told you I had written to Mr. Alton—I meant to tell you yesterday."

Marjorie relapsed into scornful wrath.

"If you must write, why did not you tell the truth?" she questions, taking no notice of the offered hand.

"I did tell the truth, Maja. In your heart you know that I did," he cries, passionately. "You love me—you have loved me all this time. I knew it, and I made up my mind that you should be my wife, for I, too, love you dearly. I broke off my engagement, and trusted you would do the same, and you will—you must. It is our fate to come together, and there is no use struggling against it any longer. See, I am free. I want you to marry me. I cannot do without you. Be kind to me, Maja. You know that I meant no harm."

The white heat of Marjorie's passion is over now, and a great wave of sorrow and penitence threatens to overwhelm the bitter feelings which have been triumphing in her heart since she has left John Alton's presence.

"Ah me?" she says, piteously wringing her hands. "How can you have deceived yourself so? What have I said or done that could lead you to think I did not love him better than all the world?"

There is anguish in her voice, in her young face, upturned with a look of such heartfelt earnestness that he cannot longer doubt its sincerity.

He seizes her hand and speaks eagerly, a strange hoarseness in his voice.

"You have not said or done anything wrong, Maja. Ever since I came back you have avoided me, been cold to me, said hard things that I would not have borne from any other living being. Only, as I live I thought all this was sheer pretence. I thought you cared for me and were struggling to crush the feeling, that you might not give other people pain."

"Ah! what shall I do?" sighs the girl. "I must have been to blame, and I did not know it. I see my mistake now, when it is too late." And great tears begin to run down the woe-begone, fair face.

Lord Castleton has become very pale now. He is playing a losing game, he feels sure.

"You did love me once, Maja; you must yet," he says.

"No! no! no!" is her only answer, delivered with sorrowful emphasis.

His face works convulsively, and he proceeds with increased vehemence, unconsciously grasping her hand so hard that he hurts her.

"You did once, when I asked you to marry me, and you refused—that day in the wood. You loved me then."

"Yes, then." And there is a fresh shower of tears.

She will be truthful and honest, no matter how his questions lacerate her heart, which would vainly bury in oblivion all the hateful, foolish past.

"And if then, you must still," cries the young man.

"No! no! no!" she says, with sad vehemence; and this time he fully believes her, and, sitting down in a chair by the fire, stares silently into the embers for a few moments, covering his face with his hand, that she may not see his agitation.

While Marjorie is wiping away her tears, and meditating a quiet withdrawal, he looks up and resumes his questioning.

"When did you change?" he asks, huskily. "Was it all at once, or little by little, as you learned to know Mr. Alton's perfections?"

The sneer does not provoke Marjorie as he expects it will.

"Yes," she says, in a low, pained voice, "it was as if my eyes were opened day by day more and more, and I saw how grand his simple, unselfish life was, and how mean and paltry mine."

"And mine," interposes the earl, with a harsh little laugh; nor does she correct his statement.

"And he was so noble every way; and he loved me—me, who turned to him at first only because I was so tired and wretched and hopeless of ever learning to be good by myself. And with this childlike confession her voice breaks down into a sob.

"And he comforted you, and taught you to forget poor me, who have no such wonderful perfections to recommend me," suggested Lord Castleton, trying to be satirical, by way of saving himself from utterly breaking down before her.

Marjorie is not listening, but is absorbed in her own thoughts, to which she is trying to give some indelible utterance.

"And I was very happy till you came back and told me you cared for me still, and—that sort of thing"—poor Maja's sentimental repertory of phrases is a scanty one—"and I was sorry, and perhaps, foolishly friendly on that account, and because I really liked you—why not as I did him."

"I see," says her companion, in his old tone; and he heaves a great sigh, and rises, as if to be gone.

"Ah!" continues Marjorie, struggling with another rising sob, "it is hard to find that I have only been true to him in my heart. I have seemed to love you, you say. If that has been so, I beg you to forgive me—I have been greatly to blame."

"Will you swear to me that you don't, Marjorie? I can't help thinking you do—a little," says his lordship, suddenly changing his tone to one of eager entreaty.

"No," she replies, with sorrowful firmness, "I do not. I am not angry, except with myself"—and she fixes perfectly gentle wet eyes on his troubled face—"but I do not love you; that is all over. Let us part now, for all this talking is doing no good."

"Stop a moment. This unlucky letter made you lose even the little spark of liking you had kept for me

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONFESSIONS.

—just out of the force of habit—for the sake of pleasant old times. Mr. Alton's generous, noble way of receiving it made you more in love with him than ever—is not that so?" he asks, trying hard to hide under a mask of levity the bitter mortification he feels; and he looks at her keenly.

Signing heavily, she answers him with simple directness. "Yes, Lord Castleton. I could not help it, and perhaps it is best so."

"And this is the very end, Maja?"

There is no sneer in his voice or look now, as, once more seizing her passive hand, he gazes searchingly into her sad, tear-stained face.

"The very end, thank God!" she answers, upturning streaming eyes to his; and then he lets go her hand and turns his back upon her, with a stifled groan, at last convinced that he has made a fearful mistake.

She is quietly moving towards the door, when he calls her back.

"One minute more. You have all the rest of your lives to spend in each other's company, you know." And he tries to smile.

"What do you want of me?" And the girl and he stand face to face again.

"I only want to say a word for myself. I don't know that you quite understand how I took it into my stupid head that you would be willing to marry me."

"Don't speak of that any more. I am quite well aware that I ought to consider myself very highly honored, Lord Castleton," she interrupts, with a good deal of hauteur; but he goes on, unheeding her audacious speech.

"A vast majority of young ladies don't marry for purely romantic reasons, you see, and—excuse me speaking plainly out—it seemed to me that I had a good deal to offer you—if I had been— He hesitates how to express himself, and she makes a suggestion, a tremble of indignation in her voice.

"A poor man without means of bribery, you would say?"

Lord Castleton colors, and lifts his eyes, which have sought the floor during the delivery of his explanation.

"Put it as you please," he says, rather crossly. "I only want you to understand that I should never have dreamed of coming forward at the eleventh hour without having some substantial advantages to offer you."

"Have you anything more to say? If not, please let me go away. From first to last you have misunderstood me altogether," she retorts, tears welling to her dark eyes. "I have a thousand faults, but I am not mean and calculating. You made a great mistake in thinking you could buy me in this way."

The earl tries to explain that he has hurt her feelings unintentionally; but she will scarcely allow herself to be appeased.

"You are very hard on me, Maja, and God knows I have not meant badly by you," he remonstrates. "Think what I have flung away for the love of you—my own self-respect, the most faithful heart that ever beat in woman's breast." There he stops short, his lips twitching, and tears of keen vexation forcing themselves to his eyes.

His words have suggested a new hope to Marjorie, and she ponders it for a moment, then speaks in an altered tone of friendly earnestness.

"Lord Castleton," she says, "you will very soon forget me. Your life will not be spoiled for you, after all. We both erred in trying to find happiness in a love which had no sure foundation. I have found out my mistake, and you will yours."

"You are very complimentary," retorts his lordship, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders.

"I am too much in earnest to think of mere politeness," explains the girl, without the least crossness.

"Ah, how cold you are! how unforgiving! Can't you feel for anybody but him?" he cries, making another last appeal.

"I have asked you to forgive me already. I own that I have been foolish; what more can I say? Surely your own heart must tell you that, however much I may deserve your blame, John Alton has an undeniable claim to hear from your lips that you have at least done me wrong in supposing I wanted to be free from my engagement. Think over everything from first to last, and I am sure you will own that I have not been the only one to blame, Lord Castleton." And she begins to cry once more.

Lord Castleton is silent for several minutes, during which he disturbedly paces the library, occasionally bestowing a repentant look on the distressed girl whom he has too much generosity to hold responsible for his unhappiness.

On the whole, he thinks that she has behaved very nobly—too much so, in fact—and that he is bound, as a gentleman, to make an acknowledgment of his own misapprehension of her feelings.

"I want to see Mr. Alton, Maja. I know I have used him badly. I should like to ask his pardon, and to wish him joy," he startles Marjorie by suddenly declaring, stopping his perturbed walk to and from the room, and gazing at her with eyes full of heartfelt contrition.

She hastens to compose herself, and looks up with a grateful expression.

"Ah, Lord Castleton," she answers, "that is kind and noble, and I thank you with all my heart."

"And when that is over, I shall go away for a long time. Will that content you, Marjorie?"

"That must be as you please. I wish you well and happy wherever you go."

She has let him take her hand now, and her eyes look him through and through with a grave candid gaze, which convinces him it is to her a matter of comparative indifference to what quarter of the globe he carries his sore heart.

Then together, without uttering another word, they seek John Alton, who is sitting sunk in a sad reverie by the hearth where she had left him when, determined to bring forward incontrovertible proof of her fidelity, she went off in quest of Lord Castleton.

"I HAVE come to apologize, Mr. Alton. I have made a great mistake, and given you a deal of unnecessary pain. Will you forgive me?" says the earl, looking very hot, and speaking in a great hurry.

He holds out his hand to John Alton, who has risen, and is staring in a rather bewildered way alternately at him and at Marjorie, who has withdrawn a little, and half hidden by the draperies, is gazing out upon the square.

"I beg your pardon—I do not quite understand. What does this mean, Maja?" The gentleman thus addressed returns in a low, unsteady voice, and too much agitated to notice the offered hand, he wheels round to the girl.

She is by his side in a moment, and Lord Castleton's heart suffers a sharp pang as he sees her beautiful eyes upturned to John Alton's in an eloquent glance which explains everything to the perfect satisfaction of her betrothed.

They do not want him there. They care nothing for his condescending apologies. Before he is well out of the room, they will be in each other's arms. He makes up his mind to beat a retreat as speedily as possible.

"I forgot to tell you—what I fancied you need not be told—that Lord Castleton was mistaken in supposing what he did," falters Marjorie, casting down her eyes and blushing hotly.

There is a mighty whirl of thoughts in John Alton's brain, and a few moments pass ere he has found his voice, and is able to give a coherent reply to the gentleman beside him who has repeated his apology.

"Do not say any more. I am sure you did not mean any harm. We all make mistakes many times in the course of our lives, Lord Castleton," he says at last, with a simple, gentle dignity which strikes the young nobleman as strangely impressive.

"I have been very much to blame," confesses Miss Maja, hanging down her pretty head; and her betrothed bestows one momentary look of loving incredulity upon her.

"I am sure that is not the case, Marjorie," he answers, rather rebukingly; and a second glance conveys to her his desire that she will not pain him with any further assertion of her iniquities—at least while other people are present.

"She has behaved nobly from first to last, allow me to tell you," says his lordship, as Maja withdraws to her old post.

"I am quite sure of that, Lord Castleton," responds her betrothed, with a quiet little nod, which intimates a disinclination to discuss that subject further; and he looks at the earl with a sort of grave, sympathetic friendliness in his deep dark eyes.

There is a wonderful amount of governing power in that self-controlled, gentle, brave-hearted man who is to be impulsive Marjorie's husband. The weaker nature of the young noble succumbs to it, instinctively recognizing its superior.

During the minute or two that follows, he is not the Earl of Castleton graciously condescending to make amends for a great wrong by a graceful apology, but simply an earnest, downcast mortal, speaking penitently out of his heart to a wiser and nobler fellow-mortal whom he is conscious of having treated unfairly.

Marjorie, who has taken refuge in her window-hook, directly after enlightening John Alton as to the real state of matters, listens in spite of herself.

Presently the two men's voices sound close beside her, and she turns round.

"Lord Castleton wishes to say good-bye to you, Maja."

"And to wish you joy, and to tell you that I would give ten years of my life to have this last year to live over again, so as to spare you the pain I have thoughtlessly caused."

That is what they are saying. Lord Castleton's hand is held out to her; and though she does not see very clearly, she thinks that there are tears in his blue eyes, and that his handsome, fair face is full of real contrition.

"Good-bye, Lord Castleton; and I am sorry too. It was partly my fault—almost all my fault; only I was so young, and I did not understand my own feelings," falters she, giving him her hand, and looking up at him with streaming eyes and a pathetic quiver of her lip.

"I ought to have understood them, and to have believed what you say when I wanted you to break your engagement. I have nobody but myself to blame," says the earl, sadly, giving the little hand a last hard grip.

Then she hears a husky whisper of "Good-bye for the last time, Maja;" and her big, yellow-bearded, aristocratic first love strides away in great hurry, closing the door behind him.

Just as his lordship has foreseen, her next proceeding is to turn to John Alton, and with one eloquent glance into his agitated, happy face, nestle to his honest, true heart in an ecstasy of loving adoration.

"And you are sure, quite sure that you love me best? For God's sake, see that you know your own heart at last Maja!"

That is all the rebuke her betrothed has for her; and as its effect is to set her crying pitifully, he repents it as soon as it is spoken, and seeks to make amends for his cruelty by a great deal of tender petting.

"I want to tell you everything, from beginning to end, about him and me. You ought to know," says Marjorie, when she is sufficiently composed to speak, and she seeks to free herself from the kind imprisoning arms in whose embrace she is resting.

"I don't care to know, my dear little Maja. It is all over now, and please God, nobody will be the worse

for it in the end. Don't distress yourself speaking about it. I am quite content, since you love me now," responds truthfully John Alton, with a tender smile holding her fast; so that the confession she persists in making proves a very comfortable penance, after all.

"Have I been very much to blame, John?" she asks by-and-by, when it is over.

"No," he replies, stoutly. "You have done some foolish things, I admit; but you have been hardly tempted, my poor little darling." And a kiss seals her absolution.

"And you are not angry?" questions Miss Bruce, rather unnecessarily; and as she speaks she softly strokes his hand.

"Very angry; but not about that—about something of more recent occurrence."

"What is that? I am sure I have behaved well lately—the last day or two, anyhow."

"I don't know about that. I am going no farther back than to this afternoon's performances. What did you mean by allowing me to think you were in love with his lordship? Why did you not at once tell me he had made a mistake? I don't see your motive for giving me that extra half-hour's misery, you cruel little Maja."

From the stool at his feet upon which she has seated herself she answers him, love and admiration in her upturned eyes.

"Ah, John," she says, "it was not right; only I was bewildered at first, and scarcely knew what you meant. Then it all dawned upon me, and I was dumb with shame and awe; and all the time you went on speaking so grandly in such a simple, quiet way, as if you were doing the most natural thing in the world in sacrificing yourself so, I kept contrasting myself and you."

"Oh, hush, Maja, you nonsensical girl!" her betrothed interrupts, coloring. But Maja will not be hushed until she has said her say. She only puts her pretty lips to the caressing hand which he has laid over her mouth to stop these embarrassing praises, and proceeds, in a voice broken by emotion.

"All the time I kept contrasting myself and you, and you and Lord Castleton, whom I had been fool enough to care for once, just a little while ago, far more than I did for you; and I felt as if, after all my follies and fickleness, I had no right to expect you to believe me, though I told you I was true at last; and I made up my mind that the man who had accused me should clear me in your presence."

"As if I needed more proof than your word, Maja. That was not trusting me much," John Alton interrupts once more, tender reproach in his glance.

"You had a right to get it, though. That is what I felt. You were going to make me your wife, and you had a right to know that I was clear in other people's eyes—clear of such meanness and treachery as he imputed to me, anyhow." And here the girl's voice breaks off in a quivering sob.

"Never mind, dear, it is all right now," he says, soothingly, stroking back the dark hair from her aching forehead as she leans her aching head on his knee in a tired way. "And I want to tell you all about poor Will's death. You were not listening when I spoke to you about it before."

"No, because you had stupefied me first with your startling proposal. I heard that he was drowned; and I am sorry because you are sorry, as well as because a death of that kind is so sad," the girl responds, sympathetically, at last remembering the mournful news of his cousin's loss.

Then, in a few words, he tells her of the change in his pecuniary circumstances, and of the corresponding change in the style of housekeeping which they will now be justified in making.

"My Maja will be a rich woman now," he says; when, forgetting how sad a catastrophe has brought about this money gain, she cries out in delighted surprise.

She has never seen this lost cousin of John's. She knows that his money will enable her betrothed to take such a social position as she has secretly coveted for him. Poor child! she is not able to feel very sorry.

"Yet if poor Will came back some day—such things have been heard of—I hope we should not grudge him his life, Maja," the young man remarks, giving her a grave look, wherein there is no distrust, after all, only a hint of loving rebuke.

Maja understands him perfectly, and grows suddenly solemn.

"I hope not," she responds. Then there is a thoughtful silence of some minutes, during which a new idea occurs to her, making her regard her lover with an increase of admiring reverence.

"Didn't you think it worth while to tell me about this money before you gave me up to Lord Castleton? Did not you think this might influence my decision a little?"

"No, I did not, Maja."

"Why not?"

"Because I knew you better than to suppose you cared a straw what a man owned, or didn't own, if you loved him well enough to marry him, Maja."

"Everybody does not think me above being bribed, John."

"Everybody does not know you as well as I do, you see. However, we don't care a bit, you and I, above what everybody thinks of us, do we, Maja?" he answers, trying to change the tenor of her thoughts, as he perceives that she is again contrasting him with the earl.

"I don't feel sure of that, for my own part," says the girl, naively, heaving a sigh, which makes him smile.

"I feel very sure for mine anyhow," he remarks.

then he begins to speak of going away; but she only draws closer to his knee, and holds his hands the more firmly.

He is to leave for D—that evening, and she has not yet told him half she wishes to say.

"Stay just a little while longer with me, John," she pleads; and he consents without much entreaty. Then she goes on:

"Ah! how good God has been in giving me you! I am often frightened when I think what a selfish, frivolous butterfly I might have become—she checks herself, and gives him a glance of sweet apology—"I might have continued if I had married him."

John Alton's eyes rest on his wife to be with wondrous tenderness, though he answers her lightly.

"He would never have looked solemn and glum, as I often do; he would never have been obstinate, as people who know me best tell me I am."

"He would never have been my master," puts in the damsel at his feet, in a lower whisper; and, lifting her wet, smiling eyes to his, she kisses his big brown hand for the second time that afternoon, thereby distressing him greatly.

"So you have had independence enough to satisfy you for the rest of your life, I see," he says, rather mischievously.

"Yes," is her reply, gravely spoken; "I have done nothing but bungle since I tried to manage my own affairs. I mean to be very happy, now I have rolled off all my responsibilities on your broad shoulders, and to reason about nothing, but just do whatever you think best."

"You are every inch a woman, Maja, in spite of all your pretended spirit," he goes on, looking down at her with a fond glance, in which there mingles considerable diversion.

"Every inch," echoes the beauty, dropping her eyes and blushing sweetly.

"And a woman's ultimatum of bliss is to find her master, I suppose."

"You suppose rightly, Mr. Alton; only we are not always inclined to confess that, of course."

"But what is the mastery you women are willing to acknowledge, Miss Bruce?"

"Strength and goodness," says the girl; "the two combined, as they are in somebody I love dearly."

From which little colloquy we may see that Miss Bruce has once more set up an idol, and is enjoying herself to her heart's content in prostrating herself before the new shrine.

It augurs well for her future happiness and moral growth that she has this time had regard to intrinsic rather than to external worth, in the object of her adoration.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LORD CASTLETON'S COMFORTERS.

WHEN Lord Castleton quitted the couple of lovers, he marched straight into the drawing-room, where, the visitors having taken their departure, his mother and sister still sat.

A glance at his troubled face convinced them both that something serious was amiss, and Lady Castleton did not lose a moment in sending away her frightened little daughter, when his lordship, who was in a reckless hurry to make a clean breast of his misdemeanors, broke out with a startling admission:

"Mother, I have been making an uncommon ass of myself; and if I don't tell you about it, you will be sure to hear a wrong version of it all from somebody else," he said, coming up to the countess's chair.

The rebuking look in her black eyes silenced him until Lady Dorothea had left the room; then, in an incoherent, agitated fashion, he told his love-story, her ladyship only once or twice asking a question, and doing this in a tone of extreme chilliness, which had the effect of freezing up the impetuous yet easily influenced heart.

Lady Castleton was angry, disappointed, humiliated, and she was not on sufficiently familiar terms with her son to make it natural for her to express her feelings freely. An outburst of indignation would not have surprised or offended him in the least. A few words of motherly fondness would have won him to do whatever she advised; but her frigid reception of his confession sent him away in a hopeless, despairing mood, ready to succumb to any temptation which promised oblivion of his troubles.

If kind Lady Dorothea had not been watching for him as he quitted their mother, he would have dashed away out of the house without remembering her existence; but when she looked up into his unhappy face with her innocent, loving gaze, and, clinging fondly to him, begged that he would tell her what his troubles were, his sore heart went out towards this childlike comforter in a rush of tenderness which did him infinite good.

She carried him off to the security of her painting-room, where they could talk freely; and though he did not tell her very much, after all, she heard enough to call out her warmest sympathy and affection.

Kind little Dolly's notions of justice and duty were not of the most uncompromising order. She was possessed by an absorbing conviction that the chief aim of humanity should be harmless enjoyment. To be what she called comfortable, and to make other people, especially those you like, equally so, was, in her estimation, so desirable an end, that she was not at all inclined to be critical over the means her friends might try to attain it.

Yet I am sure sternly incontrovertible logic would have been worse than thrown away on that impulsive, kindly natured young man, whose heart melted into penitence when his pretty, gentle sister brought her petting words and ways to bear upon it. So, after all, it is well that our codes of right and wrong are of such a variety of character.

"And you will make it up with Nessie, won't you, like a dear, good old boy?" Lady Dorothea ventures

to suggest, fondling his hand and staring up into his troubled, handsome face with pleading blue eyes. "Poor Nessie, who has been fond of you so long, and has her *trousseau* almost ready."

Lord Castleton heaves a mighty sigh, and gives the tiny hand a loving squeeze.

"Dolly," he says, in a low, earnest voice, looking gravely at her, "don't think I'm trying to humbug you; I am speaking the honest truth for once, anyway. I like Nessie a great deal better than she or anybody else knows. I think her one of the noblest, sweetest little women in the world. If she was a poor girl, I would go straight back to her and ask her to be my friend and marry me, in spite of my confounded madness. As it is, I can't. And he ends as he has begun, with a remorseful sigh.

"As if Nessie did not know you could marry for money any day you chose! Far richer girls than she would *jump at you*, you foolish, bashful fellow!" cries her ladyship; and in his heart he admits the truth of this assertion.

"Look here, Dolly," he says, with a sudden gleam of hope in his eyes, "you're a dear little goose. Nobody takes offence at what you say or do. Get hold of Nessie some day soon, and—speak a word for me when you're alone, you know." He drops his eyes and colors a little. "Tell her that, if I'm ever to do a bit of good in life, she must take me in hand. Tell her it will be all straight running with me after, if she'll only do that. Oblige me in this way, Dolly, and I'll do anything you ever ask me, as long as I live."

"Won't I just!" exclaims the girl, delighted to help him out of this or any other scrape.

"I'll need to do no more than give her a kiss and whisper a little message from you, and the thing is done. You'll very soon find out how willing Nessie is to be friendly again."

"Ah, how good you women are, on the whole!" sighs his lordship, as he kisses her and takes his departure a little afterward; and he could scarcely carry away a thought more calculated to keep his feet out of the snares which encompass the path of an idle and unhappy young man in his rank.

"When all happy souls are asleep, Nessie's pure, true eyes will wet her pillow with tears as she lies thinking of me. She and little Dolly will remember me in their prayers to-night," he thinks; and when some fast friends urge him to join them in an evening's amusement of questionable innocence, he turns away from them in disgust, viewing the scheme in the new light which this thought kindles within him.

For once in his life he passes a solitary evening; and if his reflections are bitter, they are wholesome, and bring no miserable morning repentance.

Until Marjorie Bruce's departure for her home, a couple of days after John Alton's visit, the earl did not appear at his mother's house, nor did the ladies of his little family attempt any mediation with Miss Lisle in his behalf.

When, laden with assurances of uninterrupted goodwill and affection—for both their ladyships held that Marjorie had behaved with amazing propriety in rejecting their infatuated relative's proposal—she took herself off, very thankful to escape from a position which all their kindness could not render comfortable, the earl came back looking very restless and low-spirited, kind Lady Dorothea set about redeeming her promises without further loss of time, Lady Castleton interposing no obstacle to her doing so.

She made a friendly, cousinly call upon Miss Lisle, who was studiously conducting herself as if nothing material was amiss, and in her coaxing way begged an interview for her brother, thereby preparing that young lady for what was to follow.

"Of course I shall be glad to see my cousin Herbert at any time. He and I have had no quarrel whatever, Dorothea," was her response, a little stiffly spoken; nor did her ladyship succeed in drawing her into any confidences.

"You are the only person who can manage Ernestine, after all, Herbert," the disappointed little lady declared, when her brother questioned her as to the result of her mediation; and it was with a good deal of misgiving that the following morning he called at Mrs. Vesey's.

Thinking that her son and Miss Leslie were the proper persons to make public the breaking-off of their engagement, Lady Castleton had held aloof from any decisive action; and Mrs. Vesey following her example, the world was still unsuspecting of any *contretemps* having occurred.

Thus Mrs. Vesey's hopes of a reconciliation were not yet dead, and this visit put her in a flutter of expectation.

"Ah, if you will but make it up with him, how thankful to kind Providence I shall be, my darling girl!" was her parting whisper, as, looking very pale and *distrain*, her niece went away to the drawing-room; and after she had gone, with no other answer than an unfathomable smile and a firm setting of her lips together, she sunk into a lounging-chair and had a cry over the reserved young lady's provoking self-sufficiency.

In no very enviable frame of mind Miss Lisle's quondam betrothed stops in his restless pacing of the room and greets her as she enters.

"I'd have come before, but I thought you would refuse to see me," he says, advancing to meet her with outstretched hand; and she looks up into his remorseful, miserable face, and utterly forgets the dignified role she has been schooling herself to play.

"My poor boy, my dear cousin," she responds, with uncontrollable emotion in her voice, "how unhappy and ill you look! How could you doubt that I should be glad to see you?"

Her tender, self-forgetting sympathy fairly unmans him. He turns abruptly away, and she quietly sits down by the fire, leaving him to regain his com-

posure. In the course of a minute or two he is standing by her, speaking in low agitated tones.

"Is it possible that you have some liking for me yet, Nessie—some interest in what becomes of me?" he asks; and Miss Lisle holds out her hand to him, a rush of color suffusing her pale sad face.

"All the liking and interest I ever had, and that is a very great deal, Herbert," she answers, faltering a little over this confession.

"You are my good angel, Nessie," he tells her, for the hundredth time in the course of his life.

Gravely smiling, she lifts her downcast brown eyes, and, with a half-shy, half-imperative gesture, invites him to sit down beside her.

"That is a very old story," she says, trying to speak rallyingly, though her tones are suspiciously tremulous. "If I am your good angel, you can surely tell me what is troubling you."

"And you will help me, Nessie?" he questions eagerly.

"Yes, if all that a cousin and friend can do will help you."

"Only as a cousin and friend, Nessie?" he sighs, his face clouding over, as he seats himself on the couch beside her. "Only that? But indeed I can't ask more. You are a thousand times kinder than I deserve."

There is no longer a doubt in Miss Lisle's mind as to his motive for seeking this interview. She draws a long breath, and sternly resolves less to be heroic.

There is a short silence, during which they both stare meditatively into the fire; then she speaks again,

"Herbert," she says, hurriedly, "a ter all the years we have known each other—after all—" She stops to swallow a rising sob. "After all our hopes and plans for a future to be spent in the closest of all human relationships, we may surely be frank and honest when we are alone together. It would surely be very wrong for either of us to seek to deceive the other now."

"I don't know what you are driving at, Nessie. Speak out as plainly as you can, for my head feels stupider than usual to-day," says his lordship, sighing wearily; and he looks at her with a sort of dull resignation.

Is she, too, grown weary of him and his fickleness? Has her sorely tried love succumbed at last? He prepares for the worst.

"I am going to speak very plainly," she assures him, managing to steady her voice once more. "You want to marry me, after all, I understand. Is that so, Herbert?" And she raises her face and looks at him with a pathetic little smile.

"Yes, Nessie, if you don't quite hate me. Yet—if—" His eager assent is interrupted.

"Wait but one moment," she says, with gentle imperiousness. "You want to marry me, not because you love me, Cousin Herbert, but because you know that I love you—I have made no secret of that—because you are sorry for me; because everybody is aware that our marriage-day is fixed, and there will be a nine days' wonder and a deal of annoying gossip, if there is no marriage, after all. These are what I believe to be your principal reasons for wishing to make me your wife. Of course?"

It is the young man's turn to interrupt.

"Why don't you add to your list? You might say I want to marry you because you are rich, and I am poor; because you have a couple of fine estates in England, where I don't own an acre; because"—and he laughs a low, bitter laugh of self-scorn—"the farmer's daughter I was fool enough to fall head over ears in love with has coolly refused me, and let me see that she has a hearty love for the honest man from whom I meant to take her. There is a spice of truth in these reasons I give, and there is no more in yours. Only—you may believe me or not, Nessie"—and his voice grows thrillingly earnest now—"neither you nor I have yet named the chief reason I want to marry you; it is because"—Here he breaks off abruptly. "However, it is no matter now. You are going to tell me that your patience is tired out—that you have done with me."

He has been speaking so fast and excitedly that her attempts to stop him have been in vain.

She lays her small hand on his arm now, and looks up into his flushed, gloomy face with a tender rebuke in her expression.

"Have done with you? Oh no, Cousin Herbert!" she exclaims. "Only, for your own sake, I will not marry you. Some day you will thank me for this."

"I feel very doubtful about that," interposes his lordship, with another of his unhappy laughs; and he puts aside the friendly hand rather crossly.

"Yes," continues Miss Lisle, with an air of gentle resolution, "some day you will thank me for this. You are miserable and restless now. You fancy that you will be to always, and that it matters very little what you do with your life. Time will cure all that. Do take my advice for once. Go away for awhile. Travel, as you did before, if you feel that change would do you good. Come back by-and-by, when you have found peace of mind again, and choose a good wife—somebody who is young and pretty and light-hearted."

"Bah!" exclaims her companion, pettishly, shrugging his broad shoulders and frowning fiercely; but she runs on unheeding.

"Somebody in your own rank, who has like tastes, and will be a pleasant companion for you."

"She would be a nice sort of wife if she had all my tastes!" interposes he, with a satirical air, which considerably disturbs the flow of Miss Lisle's eloquence.

"You know what I mean, Cousin Herbert," she says, divided between an inclination to laugh and a determination to play out her dignified role. "When you find a good wife, then?"

"What then?" says the gentleman, still with no little ill-humor.

"Nothing particular," replies his cousin; "only I shall be so pleased to know that you are both happy—to see you comfortably settled down at last, she con-

eludes, with a sudden relapse into an undignified agitation, caused by his abrupt rising from her side and seizing his hat and gloves.

"Good-bye," he says, thrusting out an impatient hand. "I beg your pardon for troubling you in this way. I don't blame you for throwing me off, mind. It is just what I deserve; and there is not a woman in a thousand would behave differently. Only I thought you would not do it, Nessie—I thought you were quite different from the rest of them." And he choked down a prodigious sigh.

"How!" asks the young lady, without lifting her eyes, which have sought the carpet.

"Oh, I just thought you were such an angel—you would be able to forgive me and like me a bit, in spite of all my faults, and stick to me through thick and thin," he goes on, hurriedly, with perfect unconsciousness of being slangy.

Miss Lisle sighs, yet a faint smile dawns on her face.

"What was your other reason for wishing to marry a plain old maid like me, Herbert?" she asks, with startling irrelevancy; and she blushes becomingly as she speaks.

He is holding her hand still, and he feels it trembling within his. His gloomy face lights up at once.

"Because I really do love you, Nessie, and feel the need of you so badly. All along, at the bottom of my heart I have known that you could make me happy and—tolerably good. The rest was sheer infatuation. Is it too late to tell you this now? Come, say no, and I swear that you will never repent it, Nessie."

"No, then," says the young lady. "But for mercy's sake don't swear!" And with this attempt at being playful, she sinks down on the couch from which she has risen, and dropping her face in her hands, has a quiet, happy cry. Feeling very tender over this faithful little woman who is so entirely his own, his lordship sits down beside her and steals a caressing arm round her slim waist.

"And you will marry me on the right day, Nessie, and let everything be as if I had not—lost my senses for a little?" he asks, heaving a great sigh of relief.

"Yes," promises the young lady, looking up, and resolutely drying her eyes. "And now let us talk sensibly. Remember that I don't expect you, or want you, to make love to me. We have known each other far too long for that sort of thing, Cousin Herbert." And, with a rebuking shake of her head, she seeks to withdraw from his encircling arm.

She does not succeed, however. As he has just said, he is badly in want of her. There is infinite comfort in having her close by him, ready to pity and soothe and encourage him as nobody else in the world knows how to do.

There is not a great amount of sensible talking done, after all.

By-and-by they seek Mrs. Vesey, who is anxiously awaiting the result of this meeting.

They are both a good deal ashamed of themselves, but they manage to get through their confession not ungracefully.

"We have changed our minds, and are going to be married, after all, dear Aunt Vesey," begins Miss Lisle, blushing and smiling when Lord Castleton has finished a halting excuse for being thus tardy in welcoming Mrs. Vesey home to England.

The lady's somewhat perplexed expression vanishes, and, with a radiant smile and a sigh of devout gratitude, she extends a caressing hand to each of the reconciled young people.

"Nessie is an angel, and I am an ass, Mrs. Vesey," proclaims the earl, coloring a little; and he looks uncommonly handsome and winning as he throws a half-penitent, half-comical glance at the first speaker.

"He means me to contradict him; but I shall do nothing of the sort," remarks the young lady, with an answering look and a soft little laugh; and by this time Mrs. Vesey has recovered her speech, and chimes in with a speech of well-bred consolation.

"Ah, dear children," she says, pressing their hands and assuming a maternal air which she reserves for great occasions, "as the poet says, 'The course of true love never did run smooth.' You would not have been like other lovers if, during the whole course of such a long engagement as yours, no little trouble of this sort had arisen."

"But, you know, all along we have been more like friends than lovers, and we mean to be the same still," maintains Miss Lisle, who has a horror of being forced into a sentimental position; and she looks to her betrothed, craving confirmation of this statement.

He answers her with a rueful yet tender smile; then turns to Mrs. Vesey:

"The poet says something else far more comforting, Mrs. Vesey—at least the title of one of his plays says it for him. 'All's well that ends well,' you know," and presently he makes his adieux, volunteering to drive both ladies out that afternoon.

"Oh, how thankful I am that not one of these tradespeople has got any counter-order. Nobody will ever hear of this foolish little tiff, which came so near to breaking off a marriage so altogether unexceptionable. After all, my dear Nessie, you are not so determined as I have believed you," Mrs. Vesey cries, when the two are left alone; and Miss Lisle heartily wishes she had been a little less positive in her assertions that she would never marry her cousin.

She keeps silence, and Mrs. Vesey goes on with playfulness:

"Perhaps it is only with a certain gentleman that you are found tractable, my dear Ernestine?"

"Perhaps, my dear Aunt Vesey." And, dropping her eyes, the young lady smiles demurely.

She, too, like Maja Bruce, had a blissful consciousness of having found her master; though, unlike her, she could not have given incontrovertible reasons why she should yield her allegiance.

I think my impulsive heroine made one of her many

mistakes when she concluded that "strength and goodness combined" must of necessity be found in the masculine character which is to attract a woman's best love. Each heart has its own requirements to satisfy, its special destiny to fulfill; and so long as a power of idealization is left to cheer poor womankind, a very ordinary man will serve as a very satisfactory object of devotion.

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNITED.

So the wedding preparations went on, and Mrs. Vesey was spared the pain of having the heiress she had so long chaperoned fail to achieve a matrimonial success.

Lady Dorothea was duly presented at court, and launched into society, where, greatly to her own amazement, she speedily found herself a favorite with almost everybody.

Her stately mother used to watch with amused wonder the triumphs of the lazy, graceful, loveable damsel, and sadly declare "that poor Dolly's yellow head did not hold sense enough to counteract the effects of all this dangerous flattery." Yet there was no need for being alarmed.

The pretty yellow head was not turned, after all. Its owner's simple innate goodness acted as a talisman which extracted none but innocent joys from the gay excitement of her first season; and no doubt the moral atmosphere of many a ballroom was the fresher for the sweet presence of this fair human rosebud.

Lord Castleton and Miss Lisle were perforce dragged into the vortex of the season's gayeties; and, being in, enjoyed themselves very tolerably. His lordship's behavior as an engaged man was pronounced exemplary, and Miss Lisle was generally considered a highly enviable woman.

Space will not allow me to give the details of the marriage, which was duly solemnized at St. George's, Hanover Square, one sunny April morning. A very distinguished company assisted. The bride, if not very pretty, looked very sweet and interesting; the bridegroom very handsome, and well satisfied with himself and the world in general. An archbishop took part in the ceremony, and all the Church part of the programme was gone through in the most impressive manner.

Mrs. Vesey won laurels by the admirable arrangements of the *déjeuner*, and the graceful cordiality with which she performed her duties as hostess. Amidst showers of felicitations the happy couple drove off, en route for the Continent, in which they meant to pass the honeymoon.

The following day Lady Dorothea sent a long and glowing account of the proceedings to her still dear confidential friend, Marjorie Bruce, who received her news with surprising nonchalance, and lost no time in communicating it to her special confidant and companion, John Alton, with whom she happened to be sauntering about the orchard which lay beyond the garden at Torwood Farm.

"And you might have been in Miss Lisle's place before the altar, little Maja," remarked that gentleman, with a sigh, which Miss Bruce thought marvelously touching, though she laughed and shook her head rebukingly.

"See, there is the very first of the apple-blossom, Mr. John!" she said, giving his arm, upon which she was hanging, a shyly caressing pressure, and bringing him to a stop before a young apple-tree. "You shall have this bit to comfort you, as you seem so low-spirited on account of having poor me on your hands for life." And she broke off an exquisitely lovely little sprig and fastened it in his coat, a half-suppressed smile betraying a diverting fancy, which she sought to shape into words.

The orchard was a very retired spot, and John Alton, and his bride to be, found it a comfortable place to make love in.

He thanked her with a kiss on this occasion, saying, with one of his humorous looks, "And what are you thinking of now, Miss Maja? I see mischief in your face."

She laughed softly, and, casting down her eyes, said, in a low voice, "Well, John, to be honest with you, I was thinking that, after all, I should have had no objection to stand in Miss Lisle's place before the altar in St. George's, Hanover Square."

"Indeed!" interrupted he, lifting his eyebrows and looking hard at her, a smile in his eyes.

"Let me finish my sentence, you tyrannical fellow!" she proceeds. "I should have had no objection in the world, I was about to say, if only one little arrangement had been altered."

"Which?" asked John Alton, laconically. He was too much accustomed to the beauty's jesting speeches to be at all discomfited, and he slipped his strong arm round her waist, and held her fast until she would explain herself.

"If only somebody else had taken the bridegroom's place, inquisitive Mr. John," she laughed, after maintaining an obdurate silence of a few moments' duration; and she cast down her eyes and blushed prettily.

"Ah!" said Mr. John, drawing a breath of affected relief, "I see—somebody else who is not an earl, alas!"

"Somebody else who ought to be one—who is really a nobleman," answered the damsel, with prodigious emphasis. "Not a sham—one of Nature's noblemen—the only kind I reverence." And she slowly lifted her eyes and regarded him with a look of profound reverence, which thrilled him to the heart, although he responded, laughingly.

"What a dangerous little Radical you have grown! And you the daughter of such a staunch old Tory, too. However, Maja, there is the more likelihood that you and I may come to promotion when your political

party turn the world upside down, and they are going to do so some of these days."

They strolled on once more through the pleasant budding orchard, filled with dancing lights and shadows, as the afternoon sunshine streamed through the boughs overhead. The new spring grass besprent with flowers was soft to tread; the sky was blue, and the air full of exhilarating freshness; the birds sang joyously from many a fair budding branch; the west wind chimed in with soft rustlings amidst the foliage. A pretty fancy struck Marjorie, meditatively enjoying the beauty of the spot, as her lover and she walked on in happy silence.

"John," she said, rousing him out of a blissful reverie, "how delightful it would be to be married in an orchard—on a lovely May-day, of course, when it all was one mass of pink-and-white clusters! Think how nice it would be to wear apple-blossom instead of orange-blossom, which isn't half so sweet, and to gather it for yourself quite at hand! What a picturesque procession the wedding-party would make winding through the blossom-laden trees! Suppose you and I put this brilliant idea into execution?" And her fresh young laugh rippled out gayly.

"Ah, that won't do," said her betrothed. "We can't wait longer than the appointed time, which is just this day week, you know. The drawing-room will do very well."

"Not half so well as the orchard, if you would but have patience to wait for the blossom, Mr. John," said Miss Maja, coloring and looking down.

"Yes, in seven days more you are coming home to me, you know," remarked her betrothed, with attempted playfulness; but his own words woke a deep chord of his nature, and he suddenly changed his tone to one of unutterable, awe-struck joy.

"Oh, my dear, think what that means to me!" he said, stopping to enfold her within that loving arm once more.

"And to me!" whispered Maja, lifting her eyes for one instant, then dropping them, wet with happy tears, and hiding her fair young face on his breast.

And thus was the news of the earl's marriage talked over in the orchard at Torwood Farm.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LAST NOSEGAY.

It is the day before that which has been fixed for Marjorie's marriage, but there are no festive preparations in progress, and the girl's heart is full of sorrowful emotions, which have banished from her mind every thought connected with the now delayed wedding.

Her father and she have ridden up to the hall-door of Torwood Downs to hear how old Mr. Alton is; and John is now standing by her horse's head, looking up at her with a mighty yearning sorrow in his dark face, spite of his determined struggle to suppress any outward sign of suffering.

He has been telling them that his father (whose recent illness has been the cause of the marriage being delayed) has passed a restless night, and is this morning looking feebler than he has ever seen him. Drowsiness has crept over him several times; and the doctor, who has just left, has shaken his head over this new phase of his illness—heart disease of many years' standing—and promised to return in the course of an hour or two.

Fearing lest Mr. Alton should be disturbed by Marjorie's entrance, her father tries to prevail upon her to go home with him and let her more experienced mother come down and remain with the invalid, should she find that she should be of use.

"I won't disturb him, papa. I only want to give him his flowers and to say 'Good-morning,' if he is awake. He likes to have me by him, even when he is not able to speak much. Ah, John, do let me come in!" pleads the girl, in a tremulous, eager tone, and her dark eyes fill.

"You won't disturb him, dear; only it will distress you to see how ill he looks," says the young man, hesitatingly, as she bends forward with a beseeching gesture which prays him to help her to alight.

"Lift her down, then, John. See, her heart's in her mouth, poor lassie!" Mr. Bruce says, pityingly. "I'll wait here for a few minutes." And John obeys, and feels strangely comfortable by the momentary touch of her trembling little hand, the warmth of her breath on his cheek, the close contact of her dear presence.

They go up the little flight of steps leading to the hall-door and disappear within. Mr. Bruce watching them with fond, grave looks; and as, having caught the mare's bridle, he rides slowly to and fro, in front of the old house, peacefully sleeping in the noon sunshine, he muses sorrowfully on the mutability of human schemes.

From a ploughed field beyond the lawn there is a sudden flight of startled crows, and a prodigious cawing fills the air. Old Tam, who is raking a flower-bed beneath the parlor windows, stops his work, and, shading his eyes from the sun, watches them sweep overhead, his face assuming an awe-struck expression as he counts a little detached body which, cawing loudly, makes a mysterious wheeling and counter-wheeling round the chimneys of his master's house.

"Four o' them, Maister Bruce," he says, pointing aloft with an air of superstitious awe as that gentleman draws up to speak to him. "Ye ken what that means." And he lowers his voice to a solemn whisper as he repeats, "Ane's joy; twa's grief; three's a weddin'; four's death."

"Stuff and nonsense, Tam!" is Mr. Bruce's impatient rejoinder; yet his hale red face pales a little and gathers a heavy shadow of forboding as he moves on, leaving Tam angrily muttering, as he takes up his rake again,

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOME-COMING.

There is no gloom in the chamber whither John leads Marjorie, his father's room on the second story. It is full of sunshine and peace and silence. Stealing softly in, the two young folk stand side by side, tenderly gazing at the dear worn old face of the sleeper in the big easy-chair by the fire.

Surely there is to-day a new, a strange, spiritual grace in his look. They clasp each other's hands involuntarily; and, with difficulty restraining a burst of tears, Marjorie whispers a half-inaudible, pitying sentence, which her betrothed knows well how to interpret.

Suddenly the old man opens his eyes and looks at them both, with a beautiful, peaceful smile lighting up his thin features.

"John and Maja," he says, softly, holding out a hand to each, "my two dear bairns!"

"I have brought you your flowers, my dear, dear father," whispers the girl, sinking on her knees by his chair, and holding up a big bunch of fragrant, old-fashioned spring flowers, culled in the garden of Torwood Farm.

Since her return from London she has not once failed in paying him a daily visit and bringing him a nosegay. Of late, too, she has taken to addressing him by that sweet name "father," thereby pleasing him mightily.

John Alton's heart gives a great throb of pitiful pain as he sees the feeble, thin old hands grasp the fresh spring nosegay.

"Next spring the dear familiar form will be lying hidden away under the daisies, and my Maja will take her nosegays to a silent grave," he thinks, averting his face and gulping down a great choking sob.

Old Mr. Alton gently fingers the flowers one by one, gazing down upon them with a grave, thoughtful smile.

"We're old friends now, Maja—the flowers and me," he says. "Seventy-one years ago I opened my wonder-eyes on their bonny innocent faces. Ay, ay, but the best o' friends must part, my dear." And a quiet sigh escaped the gravely smiling lips.

John Alton turns abruptly away, his heart too full for speech.

"Ah, don't speak so! See, John cannot bear it, dear father," whispers Marjorie, tremulously; and the unselfish old man looks regretfully at him.

"You will comfort him after I am gone, little Maja?" he whispers, wistfully gazing into the fresh young face; and she bravely keeps back her tears and gives the desired promise.

Then John comes back and takes his father's hand once more.

"My dear lad!" says the old man, softly, giving him a look of unutterable love; and Marjorie's eyes overflow, in spite of her struggling after outward composure.

There is a little silence; drowsiness seems creeping over him, but he tries to shake it off.

Noticing this, Marjorie rises from her knees and prepares to go.

"You are tired now," she says. "I'll say good morning, as papa is waiting for me; but I'll come down this afternoon, if you would like me to be with you."

"Do, my dear," he answers her. Then, as she kisses him, he says, with a dignified, sweet simplicity, looking from her to his son, who stands on his other side, "God bless you both, my dear John and Maja, and give you long and happy lives! and, if it be his will, may your children and your children's children cheer your old age as you have done mine!"

He speaks slowly, and pauses for breath several times. A solemn silence follows this benediction, and presently his kind, tired eyes close, and his head sinks drowsily on his breast.

"Go now, Maja," whispers John; and Marjorie, still struggling with rising tears, murmurs a tender good-bye as he gently lays his father's head back amidst the pillows of his chair.

In a few minutes her father and she are riding down the avenue; and John Alton, who has lifted her into her saddle, retraces his steps to his father's room, and there keeps jealous watch over his slumber.

His heart is very heavy, and even the subdued sounds which steal to that upper chamber from the fair outside world grate upon his ear.

A blackbird perched upon a holly-bush is warbling shrilly, an invisible redbreast scatters his crystalline notes from a budding thorn. Tam, now at work just under the windows, chants in an undertone a melancholy psalm which the bad omen of the crows' flight has suggested.

John Alton shuts the open sash through which the sounds are stealing. Then there is a great hush, broken only by the soft breathing of the aged sleeper, and in this silence the words of Tam's psalm persistently recur to the young man's memory, as, his head bowed in his hands, he sits close by his father's chair.

"For He remembers we are dust,
And He our frame well knows,
Fragile man, his days are as the grass;
As flower in field he grows."

"For over it the wind doth pass,
And it away is gone,
And of the place where once it was
It shall no more be known."

"Thank God he sleeps so quietly," John murmurs by-and-by, gently drawing a light wrap round the frail, bent form; and as he does this, his father suddenly uncloses his eyes and looks at him with a strange ethereal smile; then, drawing one long, gasping sigh, closes them for the last time, and, his hand clasped in his faithful son's, passes peacefully away to that Far Country whither all our feet are tending.

An ancient three-storied manor-house, with small casements looking out of masses of ivy; a couple of straggling modern wings, whose long, low windows are embowered in roses; a quaint pillared stone porch, gay with old-fashioned vases, brimming o'er with geraniums—this is Bruce Hall, now the property of John Alton, Esq., whom the *D—* papers and the *Times* of a month old testified to have married "Marjorie, only child of John Bruce, of Torwood Farm, and granddaughter of John Bruce, Esq., of Bruce Hall, *D—*shire."

In front of the house lies a wide graveled sweep, bordered by flower-beds in full bloom. Beyond that a tree-shaded lawn slopes gently down to green corn-fields. Clustering round a paved courtyard at the back are modest stables and kitchen offices, with turreted gables, in which are the dove-houses. An arched ivy-grown gateway beyond the west wing leads into the gardens. A quaintly laid-out plot of shrubbery and flowers commingled lies nearest the manor-house.

The small estate is bounded on one side by the public highway leading to *D—*, a few miles distant. At the entrance-gates opening from this highway is a rustic thatched lodge, at whose rose-embowered porch there stands, on this August evening of which I speak, a familiar old form.

It is Nancy's, and she turns round and shrilly summons a friend inside the cottage. Nancy is settled down for life in this snug little dwelling; and Bell, who responds to her summons, has come over with Mr. and Mrs. Bruce from Torwood Farm, three miles away, and is making a call upon her while her master and mistress await the home-coming of the young couple, momentarily expected to return from the Continental tour which has occupied their honeymoon.

"I've opened the gates, Bell," says Nancy. "I hear the wheels o' the carriage; it's comin' up the hill, an' will be here the noo'!"

"Eh, dear," says Bell, a happy smile lighting up her hard-lined, honest face, "but I am a proud woman this day!" And she turns her head to wipe away a couple of glad tears, of which, in her honest Scotch heart, she is greatly ashamed.

The two old women stand on the lookout at the lodge-door, and presently a neat, quiet carriage wheels in through the gates and out of its windows look two kind, happy faces, at sight of which Bell and Nancy raise an outcry of welcome in the broadest of Doric.

"Come up and see us by-and-by, both of you," cries the lady, thrusting her graceful head out of the carriage window as it dashes past up the avenue, a winding approach boarded by stately beech-trees, through which one has pleasant glimpses of fresh hilly pasture-land dotted with sheep.

"Eh, Nancy, woman, hoo thankful I am to see her winsome, bonny face hame again, an' to think she's mistress o' her father's ain auld place, an' can hand up her heid amid the richt auld gentry like her forbears! My certes, your maister may think 'hissel' a happy man," says Bell; and Nancy is, not unnaturally, a good deal offended.

She gives her white-matched head a dignified toss, and makes a sharp retort.

"I'm thinkin' Mr. John's money bought Bruce Hall, an' its braw acres; an' I warrant ye he could ha' had a choice o' bonny young gentle leddies when he choose to tak a wife," she says. And if the kettle did not chance to boil over just at that very moment, thereby causing a distraction of thought, I fear a quarrel would spoil their enjoyment of the dainty tea awaiting them on the table by the sunny latticed window.

"Welcome home, my dear husband!" whispered Marjorie Alton, in a voice between laughing and crying, when they are fairly within the precincts of Bruce Hall.

"Welcome home, my precious little wife!" says John Alton, drawing her to him and kissing her fondly; and though there is one keen regret in his faithful heart his voice does not betray it.

The sun is setting, and the many windows of the picturesque old house are all aflame as they drive up to the hall-door, in whose porch Mr. and Mrs. Bruce stand awaiting them.

A couple of dogs brought over from Torwood Downs, which Lord Castleton now intends to farm himself, rush joyously on their long-lost master as he helps Marjorie to jump down into her uproarious father's fond arms. There is a wild barking and hand-shaking and congratulating for a couple of minutes; then they all go in, and a new chorus of admiration and satisfaction arises.

Mrs. John Alton is kissed and complimented and wheeled about, to be looked at from different points of view, until she declares herself completely bewildered, and runs to her legal owner for protection. That gentleman's hand is heartily shaken half a score of times during the intervals of this heathenish daughter-worship, and fervent thanks for his care of her are poured into his amused ears, while Mrs. Bruce looks on apart, her comely, serene face alight with smiling welcome.

They disperse to prepare for dinner, and Marjorie finds a quiet moment to whisper a not unwelcome expression of sorrow that her dear second father has not lived to see this happy day.

A kiss and a tender glance are her only answer; but her husband's dark face, upon which a shadow of sadness has fallen, grows cheerful, and his kind, true eyes light up with hope and gratitude.

"God has been very good to us, my dear. Let us be very happy, as I doubt not our dear old man is now," he says, after a little pause; nor does he allow another

regret to sadden his look all the rest of that evening, which we may believe passes right pleasantly.

And so in the fair rural home where she is to be mistress we leave our Marjorie, happy in her housewifely dignity, which she carries with astonishing grace; happy in her near neighborhood to her fond parents; happy in the prospect of a variety of new duties and diversions connected with her rise in the social ladder; happiest, ah! far happiest of all, in the faithful, pure, protecting love of the husband to whom she has given her impulsive, warm young heart.

[THE END.]

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